

The *Master* of Ragnarok & Blesser of *Einherjar*

BY SEIICHI TAKAYAMA
ILLUSTRATION: YUKISAN

21





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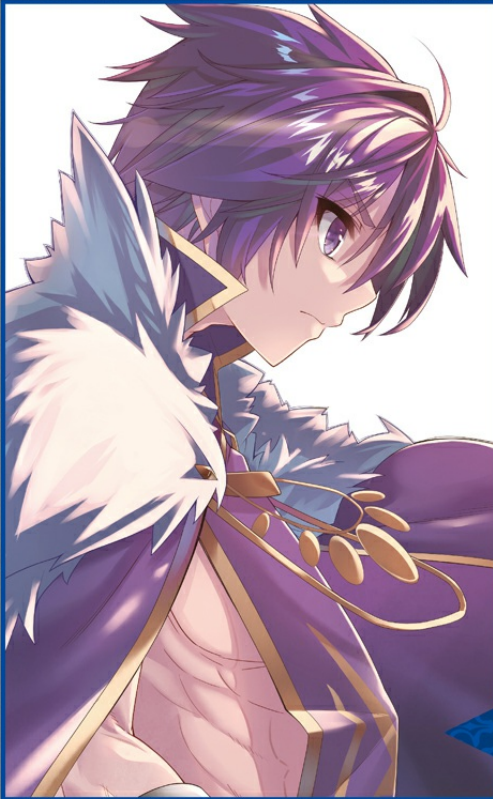
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STEEL

Characters



Yuuto Suoh

A young man summoned to Yggdrasil from the modern era. Now serving as the reginarch or "Great Lord" that reigns over the Steel Clan's many subordinate clans.



Mitsuki Shimoya

Yuuto's soulmate and dear childhood friend. Chose to become a resident of Yggdrasil to be at his side.

Sigrún

Yuuto's sworn younger sister. A powerful warrior who bears the rune Hati, Devourer of the Moon and claims the title of Mánagarmr, the Strongest Silver Wolf.



Felicia

Yuuto's sworn younger sister and loyal adjutant. She bears the rune Skirnir, the Expressionless Servant.



Kristina & Albertina

Twin daughters of the Claw Clan patriarch Botvid and Yuuto's sworn younger sisters. Both are Einherjar who can control the wind. They command the Vindálfs, the Steel Clan's intelligence service.



STEEL



Hildegard

An Einherjar bearing the rune Úlfhéðinn, the Wolfskin. Under the direction of her mentor Rún, she is improving greatly as a warrior.



Linnea

Yuuto's sworn younger sister. Manages the domestic politics of the Steel Clan as its Second-in-Command and also serves as the patriarch of the Horn Clan.

Hveðrungr

A masked man with the rune Alþjófr, Jester of a Thousand Illusions. Beneath the mask, he is Loptr, Felicia's older brother by blood—and Wolf Clan exile for his crimes against its late patriarch.



Ingrid

Gifted workshop director and Yuuto's sworn daughter. An Einherjar who bears the rune Ívaldi, Birther of Blades.

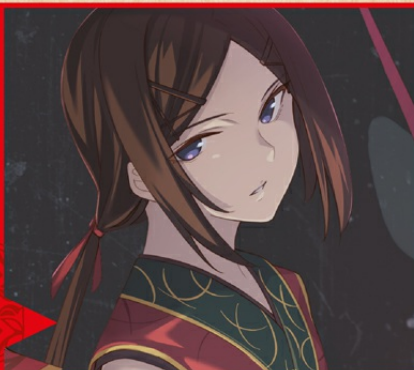


Homura

Nobunaga's daughter and a twin-runed Einherjar. Currently undergoing massive personal growth.

Ran

Nobunaga's irreplaceable and most loyal retainer. Sacrificed his life in battle to save Nobunaga.

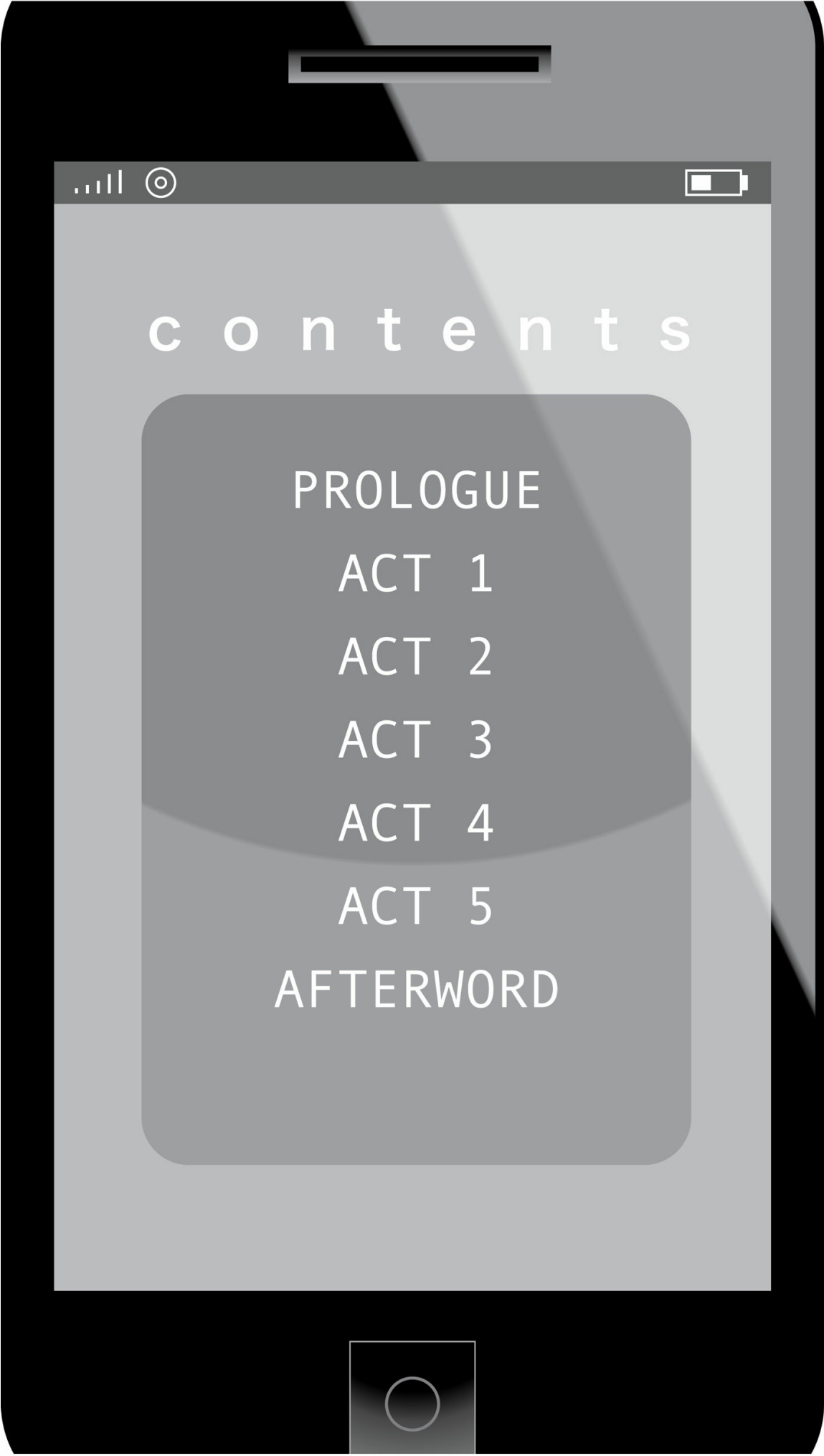


Oda Nobunaga

The greatest warlord of Japan's Warring States Period. He was summoned to Yggdrasil through a strange twist of fate. Seeks to conquer the continent as ruler of the Flame Clan.



FLAME



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c o n t e n t s

PROLOGUE

ACT 1

ACT 2

ACT 3

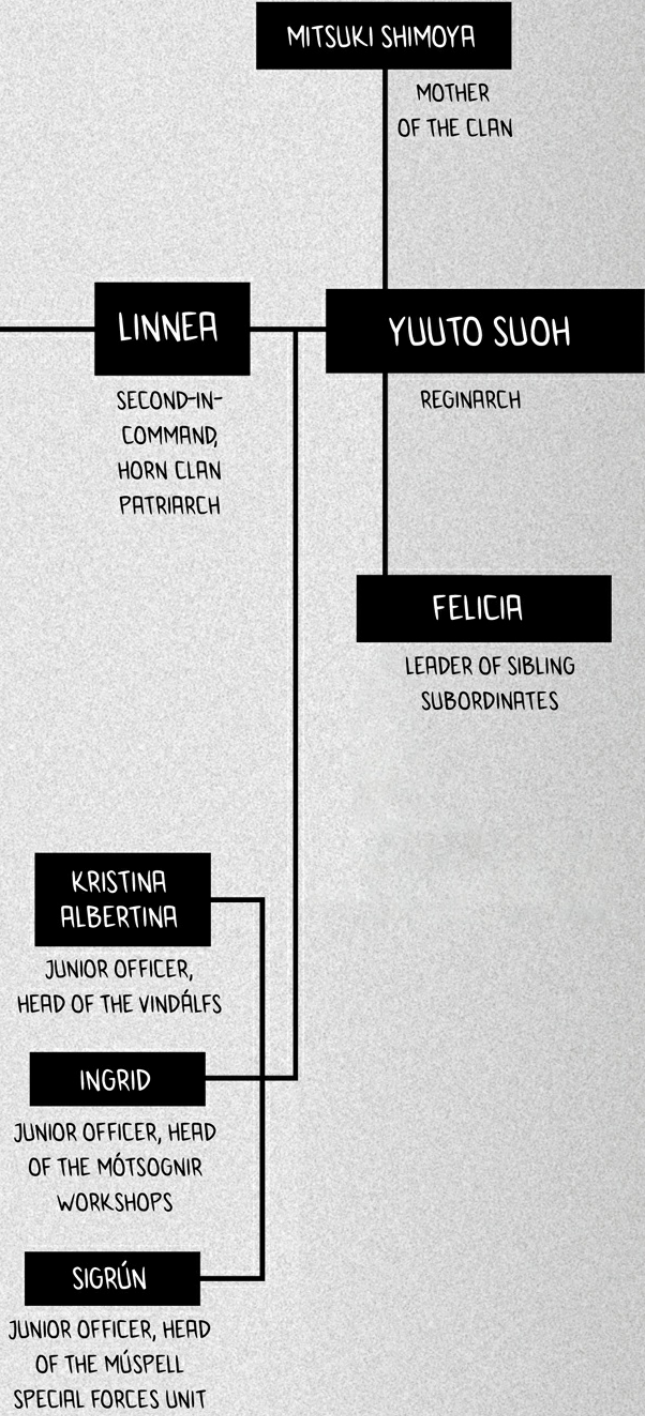
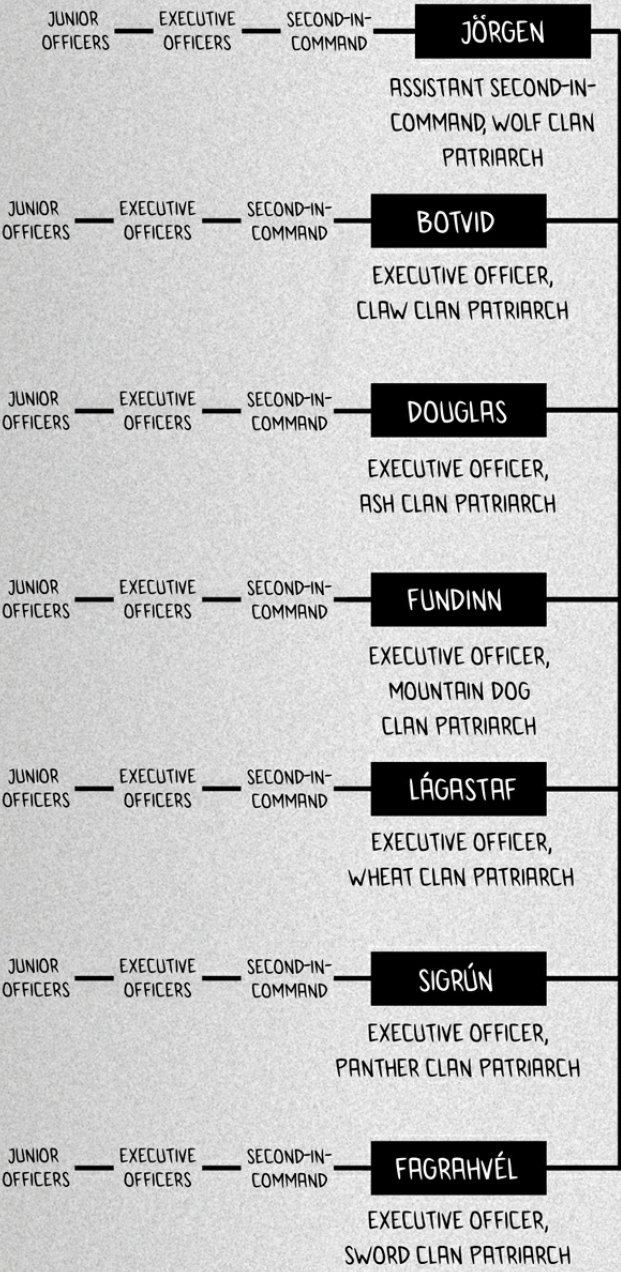
ACT 4

ACT 5

AFTERWORD



HIERARCHY OF THE STEEL CLAN



PROLOGUE

“We will now commence a full frontal assault on Glaðsheimr,” Nobunaga declared the moment he appeared in front of the commanders assembled for the war council.

The announcement that they were about to conduct a full-scale assault caught even the battle-hardened generals of the Flame Clan by surprise. It had only been a day since the Flame Clan had lost two of the Five Division Commanders: Vassarfall the Fáfnir, and Ran, the most loyal of Nobunaga’s retainers. Although they briefly thought he was joking, a single glance at Nobunaga’s expression made it clear he was serious, and the color drained from their faces.

“P-Please, hold but a moment, Great Lord! Based on the battles to date, it’s clear that Glaðsheimr is an impregnable fortress worthy of the name of the Steel Clan. To force the matter and continue our advance upon that city would vastly increase our casualties. No doubt you have a masterful plan prepared?” one of the generals stepped forward and boldly asked.

Up until this point, Nobunaga, though bold, had always been extremely cautious and had always waited until he had prepared the table for victory before fighting. Given his rank, the general knew of this firsthand. Ordinarily, the general would not have doubted that Nobunaga had a plan. However, at this very moment, it seemed that Nobunaga was fueled by anger.

“A plan?” Nobunaga asked.

“Y-Yes. I thought it prudent to confirm,” the general replied, his voice trembling. Nobunaga’s reply had contained a clear edge of annoyance.

“There’s nothing of the sort. We’ll simply force our way in using sheer strength,” Nobunaga pronounced with conviction.

“Wha?!”

This time, the general was struck mute with shock. As he had noted himself,

trying to capture Glaðsheimr through brute force was a fool's plan. He wasn't even able to imagine how great the losses would be. Then there was the fact that the Flame Clan had rapidly expanded its territories over the past few years. It was difficult to confidently state that the new territories had been fully assimilated into the Flame Clan. The reality was that they were held in check by the clan's overwhelming military superiority. If the Flame Clan were to lose too many of their men, supporters of the former rulers might very well rise in rebellion, threatening to seriously erode the Flame Clan's territory. It was far too risky. He needed to warn Nobunaga against this plan and convince him to reconsider.

“Urkh... Gasp...!”

Despite his reservations, however, he wasn't able to raise his head. His mouth wouldn't move. It took a great deal of effort even to breathe. While the general was a veteran who had served Nobunaga for a decade, he had never seen his liege express this much rage. Nobunaga's ordinary aura was that of a wild predator—the conqueror's aura he gave off now made that seem like a gentle summer breeze. The general could do nothing but cower like a frog facing a cobra, sweat pouring from his brow. It was a humiliating display, but he was still one of the better ones.

There were several thuds from around the general as several of the commanders collapsed despite being in the presence of the patriarch. They all clutched at their chests, and their faces were purple from a lack of oxygen. Terror had caused them to start hyperventilating, despite the fact that everyone present was a grizzled warrior who had fought on countless deadly battlefields.

“Not enough sleep? Tch. Such weakness.” Nobunaga clicked his tongue and drew the sword on his hip. Nobunaga hated idleness and a lack of effort more than anything else. To him, for the commanders to collapse in front of their patriarch showed that they were simply lacking in a sense of urgency.

No, that wasn't it—or so the general wanted to say, but the only sounds that came from his mouth were wheezes. The general's consciousness was slipping away. The aura Nobunaga radiated was no longer that of a man. The figure that stood there was a god—no, a demon lord—driven by flames of hatred.

ACT 1

“Ba ha ha ha! We have nothing to fear from the Flame Clan!”

“All we need to do is skewer them with our spears.”

“Glory to our reginarch, Suoh Yuuto!”

“Cheers!”

Valaskjálf Palace was abuzz with the sound of the spontaneous victory parties scattered around its grounds. The celebratory mood was understandable—they had won successive victories against the Flame Clan, an opponent against whom they had previously been forced to endure a string of humiliating defeats. They had even been able to kill one of the Flame Clan’s greatest generals, Vassarfall the Fáfnir, and Sigrún’s Múspell Unit, a symbol of victory to the Steel Clan, had joined up with their forces. Even without alcohol, the mood of the army was elevated by the circumstances.

“I’d heard we’d been ordered to keep fire away from the area at all costs. I never would have imagined the air itself would ignite had we disobeyed those orders...”

“Hah. I imagine the Flame Clan soldiers got a real fright.”

“Oh, they certainly did.”

Yuuto himself was busily engaged in an enjoyable chat with the Horn Clan general Haugspori, a key player in the recent victory, as the other generals celebrated around them. The subject at hand was the fire attack that they had unleashed on the Flame Clan using the highly distilled spirits at their disposal. Haugspori himself had been quite a distance away from the Flame Clan’s ranks, but it seemed he had gotten a good look at their reactions. Such was the eagle-eyed vision of the Steel Clan’s greatest archer and an Einherjar with the rune Ljósálfar, the Light Elves.

“I was certainly surprised by how you managed to pull that off. I heard you hit countless urns that the trebuchets launched. That was a feat of divine

marksmanship,” Yuuto said in admiration.

“It wasn’t actually that big of a deal. When I first heard what needed to be done, I thought it would be impossible to pull off, but when it came to it, it was easier than shooting a flying bird. It was easy to read how they arced through the air,” Haugspori replied with a modest shrug of his shoulders. His expression, however, indicated he was proud of his accomplishment. “At the very least, I’m relieved I don’t have to give up the title of the Steel Clan’s greatest archer.”

“Ah, right, you won by two arrows, right?” Yuuto asked.

“Yes. Uncle Rungr was quite the shot, too, but I was still better,” Haugspori said, chuckling as his lips twisted into a proud smile. It seemed he was quite pleased to put one over on Hveðrungr, the man who had once been his enemy. There was something appropriate about the fact that Hveðrungr wasn’t quite able to topple the Clan’s, and perhaps Yggdrasil’s, best archer.

“Lord Haugspori, we’d appreciate it if we could have a bit of your time. It is only fair we get a chance to hear of your exploits.”

Haugspori let out a cry of surprise as a pair of arms suddenly grabbed him from behind. Of course, he wasn’t actually caught by surprise, and he was simply playing along with the act as part of the partying atmosphere. There was no way a man as accomplished in war would be caught by surprise from behind.

“Your Majesty, if we may drag him off?” a stern-looking man with a thick beard asked respectfully. His name was Fundinn. Though clad in a bare minimum of furs, he was a muscular man who showed off his physique without a hint of modesty. Although he appeared like any other mountain bandit, he was, in all actuality, the patriarch of the Mountain Dog Clan, and one of the highest-ranking members of the Steel Clan.

“Yeah, I’ve heard what I’ve wanted to hear. Go on and take him. With that said, it’s about time you returned the guest of honor of this party to me, wouldn’t you say?” Yuuto responded.

“Ah, of course. No doubt she would like to return to you as well, Father,” Fundinn said, nodding in agreement as he disappeared into the crowd, Haugspori in tow. Yuuto watched him depart and let out a long breath, letting his shoulders slump for a moment.

“Phew...”

Sieges were exhausting. While he had permitted victory celebrations to allow the soldiers to vent their frustrations and to improve morale, Yuuto himself still felt the pressure of being under siege. Yes, they had won the most recent engagement—the fact that they had been able to take down Vassarfall the Fáfnir, one of the Flame Clan’s Five Division Commanders, was a big accomplishment. They had, however, taken their share of losses. Though the number of dead was thankfully rather low, there were a fair number of wounded. A particularly painful loss had been the fact that Erna and Hrönn had been wounded gravely enough to knock them out of the fighting. The two were particularly notable for their offensive strength, even among the elite Einherjar that made up the Maidens of the Waves. Just having them on the front lines provided a massive boost to morale.

Yuuto had to admit that the forces he had at his disposal had been depleted by that battle. Furthermore, he had already expended one of his important trump cards—the distilled alcohol firestorm. The enemy had let the Steel Clan scatter alcohol over them because they weren’t aware that alcohol was flammable. He wouldn’t be able to use the same tactic a second time. Also, while the Flame Clan had lost their northern army, they retained their eastern, western, and main southern forces. Given that they had probably also collected the remnants of the northern army, they still probably had at least eighty thousand men at their disposal. The Steel Clan Army, however, numbered just a touch over thirty thousand men, of which three thousand were wounded. The situation still massively favored the Flame Clan.

“Father, I’m told you wished to see me.”

A familiar voice shook Yuuto out of his reverie. When he looked up, silver hair wavered in front of him. He felt his expression lighten and his brow unknit.

“Yep. Once again, welcome back. I’m so happy you’ve returned,” Yuuto replied as he greeted Sigrún with a warm, genuine smile. While she had come to see him to report her return, his dealing with the retreat back into Glaðsheimr and the victory celebrations meant he hadn’t had much time to speak to her. In fact, it had been two months since he had last seen her.

Furthermore, she had been considered missing in action since being washed away by a surge in the Körmt River. Yuuto wanted to make sure he took the time to properly welcome her home.

“I am glad to be back at your side, Father.”

It seemed Sigrún understood Yuuto’s intent, and she allowed a smile to creep onto her usually stoic features. The sheer gap from her usual expression made her smile seem all that more dazzling to him. Lately, she had started to express more of her emotions in her facial expressions. She was already popular among the soldiers as the Frozen Flower and the Goddess of Victory, but if they were made aware of this development, no doubt it would drive her popularity to new heights.

“Yeah, and thank you for your souvenir. It was a huge help,” Yuuto responded gratefully.

The souvenir in question had been the head of Vassarfall, one of the Five Division Commanders of the Flame Clan Army and the commander of the northern army who had so fiercely resisted the Steel Clan. Sigrún was now not only a goddess of victory to the soldiers—even Yuuto had started to regard her the same way.

“I was only fulfilling my role as Mánagarmr,” she stated earnestly.

“Just doing your job, huh? If that’s what the job entails, your successor is going to have a hell of a time filling those shoes!” Yuuto chuckled as he considered how much the next generation’s warriors would struggle to live up to Sigrún’s reputation. He knew with confidence that they wouldn’t be able to match her accomplishments. Not only that, but they’d be constantly compared to their predecessor. Yuuto wasn’t able to resist feeling sympathy for that person.

“But, well, the best souvenir you’ve brought me...” Yuuto trailed off and lightly gestured for Sigrún to come closer. In response, Sigrún knelt to one knee and tilted her head in his direction. Yuuto gently placed his hand atop her head. “...is your safe return! Well done!” He then ruffled her hair with all of his might. He knew that war was her life, and he knew he needed her on the front lines, but if he was honest, he would have preferred not to send her to the front.

What had made matters worse was that this time, she had been sent on a separate assignment and had been struggling both physically and mentally before the fact.



His relief and happiness at her safe return were pronounced. However, in contrast to her usual happy expression at having her head patted by Yuuto, Sigrún's face took on an apologetic pout.

"My apologies, but I can't say that I've come back completely unharmed..." she stated sheepishly.

"Ah?! W-Were you injured somehow?!" Yuuto couldn't help but look at her wide-eyed in surprise. He had received regular messages from Linnea via messenger pigeon, but none of Linnea's reports had mentioned anything of that sort. The news had caught him completely by surprise.

"Yes. My right hand isn't working as I wish."

"That's your dominant hand! Was it wounded?!"

"No, not a physical wound, at least. I believe it's a side effect of spending too long in the Realm of Godspeed."

"Ah, that..."

He had heard that the ability allowed Sigrún to move with god-like speed, but that after prolonged use, it left her with muscle cramps across her entire body.

"So the technique had its dangers," Yuuto said with a pained expression.

In modern Japan, it was well known that human muscles were only capable of exerting about thirty percent of their full strength due to its popularity as a trope in fiction such as manga. It wasn't because humans were predisposed to reserving their strength, but just like how professional athletes often suffered from injuries, there were limits to the amount of force that the human body could withstand. Sigrún's Realm of Godspeed was essentially a way for her to remove the limiters that kept her from overstressing her body to assist her in life-and-death situations. It should have been obvious to him that if she used it too often, Sigrún's body would eventually begin to break down as it was unable to withstand the damage that its extensive use was bound to cause.

Yuuto frowned apologetically and bowed his head to her. "I'm sorry. It's all my fault. I knew that it was dangerous, but I couldn't tell you not to use it."

"No. If I hadn't used it, I wouldn't have been able to be here with you like this,

Father,” Sigrún replied.

“...I see. He must have been a hell of an opponent.”

That was the greatest reason Yuuto had never been able to prohibit her from using it. It was one thing to not use it in exhibitions or sparring matches, but Sigrún regularly engaged in life-or-death fights. He was afraid that if he put restrictions on its use, Sigrún would end up dying as a result.

“He was. If anything, he was so powerful that it’s a miracle I got away with just losing the use of my right arm. He was far stronger than I am,” she explained.

“If he’s got you saying things like that, then I’m damned glad you made it back to me.” Yuuto then once again stroked her hair and placed his palm against her cheek. He needed to feel it—the warmth of her skin that proved she was still with him.

“Things are starting to get a bit difficult now...”

Yuuto deeply furrowed his brow as he lay sprawled on his bed after the end of the party. While he hadn’t mentioned it in front of Sigrún, given her extraordinary contributions to the army, her injury was one of the worst developments that could have occurred. Certainly, he would prefer not to send her to the front lines, but at the same time, there was a part of him that had looked forward to her contributions on the battlefield. Being a patriarch required balancing competing desires like those.

“Indeed... I’m told Nobunaga’s daughter Homura is twin-runed. If Rún can’t fight properly, then dealing with her will become substantially more difficult,” Felicia, sitting next to him and gently stroking his hair, said with a troubled expression.

“Yup...” Yuuto replied.

According to Hveðrungr, though Homura was still a child, she possessed superhuman physical abilities.

“I initially had an advantage thanks to her being both off guard and rather arrogant. I was somehow able to defeat her because she was still young and her

technique was rough, but I don't know if I could do so again," he had explained.

She was strong enough to make even Hveðrungr uneasy. With Erna and Hrönn wounded and out of action, he couldn't think of whom to send against her.

"Sometimes the greatest opportunity comes after the period of greatest danger, but the reverse is also true," Yuuto muttered.

Bad news tended to come in bunches, and another new difficult problem had just popped up for Yuuto to deal with. Southern Glaðsheimr had been a sea of fire for a while, but because the majority of houses were made of adobe, the fire was quickly dying down. It would probably completely die out by tomorrow morning. Of course, that was well within his calculated results, but although the adobe houses wouldn't burn, they had grown more fragile due to the high temperatures they had been exposed to. According to Kristina's survey, most of the houses in southern Glaðsheimr had collapsed after the fire. There were many locations where rubble blocked the alleys, and on top of that, the Flame Clan Army's bombardment had also wiped quite a few of the houses off the map. That meant that the guerrilla tactics that had been the foundation of the Steel Clan's defensive plans were no longer viable options.

"So, how do we deal with them?" Yuuto let his mind weigh the possibilities as he gazed up at the ceiling. In terms of numbers, the odds weren't even enough to let him engage in direct combat with the Flame Clan forces. He needed some sort of scheme to overcome their numerical advantage. However, the honest truth was that he was running out of cards to play in that regard. He had concocted a number of schemes in preparation for this battle and readied them within the city. However, the battlefield was a living creature. The vast majority of those schemes weren't suited for the current situation and wouldn't result in any meaningful progress toward the Steel Clan's goals.

"I suppose we'll start with that one. It's perfect given that we don't know how the enemy's going to move," he decided. It was the patriarch's job to make decisions even in the worst of circumstances. After all, countless allied lives depended on his choices. It was a heavy burden—one he wanted to run away from. However, that wasn't a choice for him. He needed to grit his teeth and bear the overwhelming pressure.

“The moment we get to our new home, I’m going to abdicate. I’ll just sit in the sun and play with cats,” Yuuto stated.

“Yes, that sounds rather nice. I’ll follow you there,” Felicia replied.

“Yep. I’m counting on you to provide your lap as a pillow,” Yuuto said cheerily.

The peacefully mundane routine of daily life... Even that felt like a distant dream at the moment. It was something he was going to reclaim at all costs, and he was willing to do anything to accomplish that goal.

“Please wait, Great Lord!”

It was right when Nobunaga was about to bring down his bare blade upon his unconscious officers. A craggy but vital voice rang out. Nobunaga held back his blade right before it cut through the unconscious men’s necks and turned his gaze toward the voice, where he saw an old man with a gloriously full white beard.

“Salk...” Nobunaga muttered.

The man was none other than Salk, a grizzled veteran that the soldiers referred to as Old Man Salk out of respect, and the last surviving member of the Five Division Commanders. Because of his experience, his intelligence, and his care and cautiousness as a general, he had been placed in command of the defense of Blíkjanda-Böl, but now that the Steel Clan had practically abandoned their western territories and the Múspell Unit had appeared in Glaðsheimr, Nobunaga had ordered him to the front lines. After all, given the Steel Clan’s current military situation, there were no reasonable threats to the Flame Clan’s capital.

“You’re late. Where had you been idling?” Nobunaga glared at the old man and said icily. The other officers gulped in fear.

“Ha hah. So harsh, My Lord. I’m afraid at this age, I can’t keep up with the younglings on horseback,” Old Man Salk replied with a casual chuckle. As he had noted himself, his body was thin from age. Though his back was bent, and at a glance he appeared a withered old man, he showed no sign of being intimidated by Nobunaga’s gaze. He was one of the Five Division Commanders.

He hadn't lived to his current age through sheer luck.

"Hrmph. I'll set that aside for the moment. On what basis do you demand I spare them?" Nobunaga asked.

"First, rein in your anger, My Lord. At my age, I can let it pass over me, but it's a bit much for these younglings. The poor children, they're even struggling to breathe," Salk explained.

At Salk's observation, Nobunaga turned his gaze to the officers around him. All of them flinched backward in fear the moment Nobunaga looked at them. That wasn't enough to satisfy him though.

"They're generals in the Flame Clan. To faint at my mere anger is a sign of unforgivable weakness," Nobunaga stated coldly.

"Your rage at the moment is far too intense to be described as 'mere' anger, My Lord. It feels as though I'm facing a god or a demon lord," Salk replied.

"And yet, you seem to be dealing with it without issue."

"I suppose I am. I'm so old I may drop dead at any moment. With that thought lurking in my mind, most things seem trivial, much like flatulence in the face of a gale."

"Hrmph. Full of hot air as always."

"And by that, you mean the flatulence, My Lord?"

It was a painfully thin joke, but it took quite a bit of nerve to say it in front of Nobunaga himself.

"You fool. Tch. You've ruined the mood." Nobunaga clicked his tongue in annoyance and sat down where he stood.

"Fine. I'll forgive them this time, for your sake," he added with a frown, resting his face on his palm. Salk's words seemed to have calmed him down to a degree. He still felt that the officers were rather worrisome given that they fainted in the face of his anger (which by his own standards wasn't particularly intense), but with four out of the Five Division Commanders dead, they now made up the core of the Flame Clan. If he were to reduce their numbers before the decisive battle, that would be shockingly poor generalship—it was a

thoroughly unwise decision, no matter the situation.

“I’m glad to hear that, My Lord. I was worried you would take my head as well,” Old Man Salk said with a laugh. In contrast to his words, he showed no concern in his mannerisms.

Nobunaga snorted with displeasure at the old man’s unwavering attitude. At the same time, however, it was precisely that unwavering confidence and nonchalance that would be vital to the Flame Clan, given that they had just suffered successive losses.

“Now, My Great Lord, I’m told you were planning a massive frontal assault. No doubt you have a plan?” Old Man Salk’s expression changed from one of relaxed nonchalance to deathly seriousness in an instant. He hadn’t been present when Nobunaga had announced that fact, but it seemed he had been listening in. It was dangerous to underestimate the old man.

“What plan could possibly be needed to pull off an all-out assault?” Nobunaga responded.

“My Great Lord...” Salk said in exasperation.

“Even without a fleshed-out plan, I have great confidence in our chances,” Nobunaga stated.

Salk furrowed his brow in skepticism. Even if he had been enraged, Nobunaga wasn’t one to start a battle without being confident of victory. He couldn’t have been bothered to explain it, but he had already coolly calculated the odds of success.

“Oh? May I ask why?” Salk asked.

“The great fire. No doubt the effects of their entrapment have been weakened. Even if they had other things prepared, the fire would have consumed it,” Nobunaga explained. “If we give them time, no doubt they’ll come up with another troublesome scheme. In that case, it’s much better for us to attack with all of our forces from the south before they can do precisely that.”

“I see. Yes, that is logical.” Old Man Salk nodded as though in agreement. Salk then turned to the other generals.

“You have no objections either, I take it?” he asked with his lips curled into a smile. The officers also nodded in unison—they too seemed to approve of Nobunaga’s decision. Salk had instantly cleared the discord that had threatened to build between Nobunaga and his generals. That was an ability he had acquired through his years of warfare.

While Nobunaga appreciated that side of Salk, he also found it irritating. With his head boiling with rage, he wanted to move as quickly as possible. All his underlings needed to do was shut up and obey his orders. He swallowed the first words that had come to mind and instead waved his arm toward the north.

“Return to your units and prepare for battle! It’s time to avenge Ran and Vassar!” he proclaimed.

“Ah, so that’s how you’re moving.” Yuuto furrowed his brow and glared at the shogi board in front of him. Rather than Hveðrungr, his usual opponent, he faced a young woman who sat across the board from him.

“Heh... You underestimated me when you agreed to play against me without rooks or bishops,” Kristina replied as she placed her hand over her mouth and chuckled elegantly. She had just recently turned fifteen. Compared to when he had first met her two years ago, her height hadn’t changed, but her curves had filled out a bit, and she now looked very much like a young woman. Her perpetually expressionless features were extremely finely sculpted, and even Yuuto, who was surrounded by stunning women, had no choice but to admit she was turning into quite the beauty. She was also the blood daughter of the current patriarch of the Claw Clan, which, combined with everything else, would have made her quite the eligible bachelorette. He’d yet to hear any rumors of anyone seeking her hand, however. Given that she was now at the right age to marry in Yggdrasil, that was rather odd. The reason for that was simple though...

“Uta, my shoulders feel a bit stiff,” Kristina stated.

“At once, mistress!” Utgarda answered dutifully.

Soon after Utgarda started, however, Kristina lashed out at her with a riding crop. A clear smacking sound could be heard as it made contact.

“Eep!” she yelped in pain.

“Too strong. Use a bit less brute strength, will you?” Kristina demanded.

“But last time you said this was...” Utgarda replied.

Smack!

“Ack!”

“Quite brave of you to talk back despite your status,” Kristina said coldly.

“M-My apologies...” Utgarda responded meekly.

The reason was clearly because of this sadistic streak in her personality. Her lips were curled into a cruel smile—she was deriving great enjoyment from her actions. Yuuto couldn’t help but let out a dry laugh at the exchange. There likely weren’t many men who had the strength to be able to both readily accept her and keep up with her.

“Now it’s too weak,” Kristina complained.

“Urk!”

The riding crop lashed out yet again. Yuuto felt a brief pang of sympathy for Utgarda as she was smacked for every little mistake, but he quickly reminded himself that Utgarda had been the tyrannical and sadistic patriarch of the Silk Clan and had done far worse to her subjects. His pity toward her quickly dissipated. Kristina’s punishments were on the harsh side, but it was a necessary part of teaching Utgarda how to properly function in society.

“More! Please punish this unworthy slave more, my mistress!” Utgarda pleaded.

It seemed to Yuuto that Utgarda was learning something else entirely. He had hoped to have her understand how it felt to be oppressed—and, in the end, learn empathy for others such that she would only take actions that she would accept in return—but it seemed things rarely went according to plan. Given that Utgarda herself seemed satisfied with the current arrangement, perhaps it was okay to leave things as they were. This was hardly the time to be concerned with trivial matters like that anyway.

“Oh, I just remembered... Have you decided on your next move yet, Father?”

Kristina asked.

With that, Yuuto turned his attention back to the shogi board. He found himself in a rather difficult situation. In particular, Kristina's defenses were ironclad, and without his rooks or bishops, Yuuto had to admit he didn't have enough firepower to break through.

"This is totally not how a beginner plays," Yuuto couldn't help but mutter to himself. Kristina had adopted a tactic known as Ibisha Anaguma, which was also referred to as "The Bear-in-the-hole Static Rook." It was a mainstream strategy in modern shogi, and it had been refined by first-class shogi players over generations, eventually turning it into an impregnable defense.

"Heh heh. You're right, I've barely played this game. However, I've watched you and Uncle Hveðrungr play quite a bit now," Kristina explained.

"You've learned this much simply from watching? You're something else..." Yuuto replied.

She wasn't just going through the motions of constructing the necessary defensive formations. She had been able to flexibly adapt to Yuuto's counters as she proceeded to build up her defenses. This was what was annoying about people like Hveðrungr and Kristina—those blessed with naturally heightened intelligence and intuition. They were able to quickly leapfrog any efforts that average people could put into the game.

"Without a handicap, you're still far better at this game than I am, Father," Kristina stated.

"I would hope so. I'd be a complete joke if I lost to a beginner in an even match," Yuuto replied.

"Of course, I had already calculated that you would give me a handicap, Father. Your shogi style is less about winning at all costs and more about enjoying the game. Which was the opening I had chosen to exploit."

"I see... So you made sure you had your bases covered before challenging me."

"Yes. Something I learned from none other than you, Father," Kristina said nonchalantly. Making thorough preparations and planning for every

contingency before battle and securing victory before the battle even began—that was exactly how Yuuto the patriarch fought his wars.

“Entertaining at least. It makes it all the more interesting!” Yuuto felt his competitive streak flare up, and he smiled with a predatory gleam in his eye. Turning the flow of this game and winning would, no doubt, be quite satisfying. That was particularly true given Kristina’s usual casual arrogance. Just as Yuuto was about to make the move that would turn the tide of the game—the radio transceiver next to them came alive with a burst of static.

“This is Shadow Six. The main body of the Flame Clan Army is abuzz with activity. I believe they’re preparing for an assault, over.”

Kristina placed the radio to her ear and responded. “Understood. Continue to observe the enemy. Over.” The sadistic smile had faded from her lips.

“Father...”

“Yeah, I heard,” Yuuto replied, nodding. He had harbored the faint hope that the Flame Clan might temporarily withdraw to regroup and reformulate their strategy after two straight defeats, but it seemed Nobunaga had other ideas. The radio crackled with more static. Additional reports came in almost simultaneously.

“This is Shadow Nine. The Flame Clan Army in the west has started to move. Over.”

“This is Shadow Three. The Flame Clan Army in the east has started moving southward. Over.”

“So, they’re moving all of their forces in, it would seem... I guess Nobunaga is finally directing all of the Flame Clan’s military power toward crushing us.” With that, Yuuto swallowed a lump that he felt in his throat. Just a few minutes earlier, Kristina had mentioned the lessons she had learned from Yuuto about properly preparing and setting up the battlefield for victory before conflict even began. Yuuto himself had learned to do that from Nobunaga, though. Realizing that Nobunaga was now preparing for an all-out assault, it was safe to assume that he was doing so with a firm picture of how he would achieve that victory. This was going to be the most difficult battle yet.

“So, I’m told the Flame Clan Army’s been busy making their preparations. We need to make sure we’re ready for them, no matter when they choose to move.”

“Yes, leave it to me, Your Majesty,” Fagrahvél answered crisply and stood at attention as the orders came over the radio. She knew that Yuuto wasn’t able to see her, but given that he was her chalice father and the þjóðann, her body reflexively responded with strict formality. It was very much in character given her serious personality.

“No maaaatter hooow many tiimes I seeee it in aaction, these radioos send a shiver up my spiiine,” Bára—Fagrahvél’s most trusted adviser and strategist—standing beside her, responded and nodded, gazing admiringly at the radio all the while. Fagrahvél understood precisely what she felt. Currently, Fagrahvél was positioned in front of the front gate of Valaskjálf Palace. It was nearly two hours away from the palace’s Hliðskjálf that served as Yuuto’s headquarters, but she was able to hear his orders in real time. Not only that, but they were also able to use the same devices to acquire and communicate information about the Flame Clan Army instantaneously, even though the enemy was still many miles away. If they had needed to communicate this information using runners, it would have taken far longer to get the messages across. At best, they would have learned of these developments right before the Flame clan had made it close enough to engage. Yuuto himself stated that he came from the land beyond the heavens, and these devices were certainly worthy of being called divine instruments.

“It’s an extremely powerful device, but we can’t let our guard down. Although we possess such objects, we’re still in a rather disadvantageous position,” Fagrahvél stated as she gripped her hand tightly into a fist, her brow furrowed. In the previous Battle of Glaðsheimr, Nobunaga had managed to defeat Yuuto’s forces. This was despite the fact that Yuuto had been able to coordinate several dozen units almost simultaneously—a power that Nobunaga lacked. When Fagrahvél had faced Yuuto, she had outnumbered him three to one, prepared the most capable generals from each army, extensively drilled their forces, turned the entire army into berserkers using her rune Gjallarhorn, and acted according to tactics prepared by Bára. Despite all that, he had destroyed her

practically perfectly prepared army with little struggle. Since then, while the Steel Clan had won some minor victories against the Flame Clan Army, the Steel Clan had continually been on the defensive. Nobunaga's current actions made no sense.

"Sooo, the most frightening ooone is Odaaa Nobunaaagaa?" Bára asked.

Fagrahvél nodded in response. While the words weren't so languid when Yuuto had spoken them, Bára had just repeated something Yuuto had mentioned countless times.

"Nobunaga is so formidable that even Father describes him in such terms. There's no such thing as being too careful against an enemy like him." With that, Fagrahvél thinned her lips into a line and glared in the direction of the approaching forces. There was still no sight of them yet, nor could they hear anything that would suggest they were moving in. Even so, she still felt it clearly—a powerful, deadly aura that seemed to scorch her skin as it drew nearer. "Seems they're here," Fagrahvél stated.

"Yooou never faaaail to amaze meee. I still caaan't pick up a thiing," Bára replied in awe.

"You're as slow as ever on this front. You focus too much on what your head tells you," Fagrahvél explained.

Bára pouted in displeasure. Fagrahvél felt a surge of triumph, though she managed not to let it show on her face. She was still somewhat annoyed about the fact that Bára had burst out laughing when Yuuto had told Fagrahvél she took everything too seriously. This was Fagrahvél's way of getting a small measure of revenge.

"Ah, I get it. This is quite nice." Fagrahvél nodded as though something had finally made sense to her.

"Hmm? Whaaat are you taaalking about?" Bára asked.

"To stay a bit playful, even in a situation like this," Fagrahvél explained.

There was still a part of her that felt it was inappropriate, but she had tried it because Yuuto had told her that sort of confidence was necessary for a commander. It felt right. The most important thing was that it let her laugh

even in the face of danger. It helped drain just enough tension from her shoulders. Her nerves were no longer so taut that they risked snapping, and she felt her perspective widen. She was able to see things she had missed before. She saw the faces of her children, her grandchildren, and the fact that they seemed to have let down their guard.

“The enemy is here! Get your acts together! Don’t let your guard down despite our recent victories! We’re still the ones who are outnumbered! Lose sight of our situation and they’ll quickly overrun our positions!” Fagrahvél shouted at the top of her lungs, her throat aching from the exertion. That had been close. A few days ago, her focus would have entirely been on the enemy, and those thoughts would never have occurred to her.

Bára chuckled approvingly. It seemed that up until now, Bára had been the one who had watched for such developments and dealt with them when Fagrahvél had missed them. They had been partners for a long time now. There were occasions when Fagrahvél found Bára irritating given her casual attitude toward matters of hierarchy, but in times of crisis, there was no one else she wanted more by her side.

“So, shall we set off? Time to show those Flame Clan soldiers what Fagrahvél, patriarch of the Sword Clan, and her strategist, Bára, can do!” Fagrahvél exclaimed.

“Yees ma’aaam,” Bára replied.

Her response was so languid and relaxed that Fagrahvél felt her newfound enthusiasm drain from her in an instant. But she was used to that. If anything, this was what everyday life was like, it was reassuring. Shortly after, her radio crackled to life.

“This is Shadow Two. The Flame Clan Army is in range of the arquebuses.”

“Brilliant news. Fire!” Fagrahvél issued the order, and a heartbeat later, the thunderous roar of arquebuses rang out from the city in front of her.

“Striking first with the tanegashimas they stole from us. The damned nerve of those thieves,” Nobunaga sourly spat and crossed his arms. Nobunaga had prepared a thousand arquebuses for this battle, but the Steel Clan’s arson had

consumed the whole lot of them. Given their nature, the arquebusier companies had been positioned at the very front of the army, and that had cost him dearly. Meanwhile, the tanegashimas the Steel Clan were using had been looted from the Flame Clan capital of Blíkjanda-Böl. He found the entire situation greatly frustrating.

“Hah. To take from the enemy and incorporate into your own forces. That is the fundamental rule of an age of war, is it not?” Old Man Salk observed casually as he stroked his long beard. He had originally been recalled to serve as a division commander, but with Ran’s death, Nobunaga had made Salk his Second.

Nobunaga’s words were often difficult for the average man to understand. On top of that, his intensity, while useful as a motivator, was also capable of creating unnecessary friction and strife. Because of that, he needed someone who was unafraid of him, could understand what he said, could translate his words so that others could understand, and could serve as the lubricant that would keep the army operating smoothly.

While it was unfortunate that Salk couldn’t be sent to lead a separate, independent unit, with Ran’s death, this old man was now the only person capable of filling Ran’s shoes even among the ranks of the skilled generals found in the Flame Clan.

“Besides...” Old Man Salk’s eyes glinted with mischief. “We, too, are cheeky thieves, are we not?”

Nobunaga curled his lips into a grin and nodded in agreement. It was true that the Steel Clan had taken the guns from them, but the Flame Clan had, in turn, taken objects from the Steel Clan as well.

“It seems our new equipment is working as expected,” Salk said gleefully.

The fact that the front line showed no signs of being thrown off their march in spite of receiving a full volley of gunfire was indisputable evidence of that fact. If anything, Nobunaga felt a surge in confidence and morale.

“Very well! Wheelbarrow companies, charge!” Nobunaga yelled.

A moment after Nobunaga gave the order, a roar erupted from the front line.

The Steel Clan had left a large number of wheelbarrows when retreating from Gjallarbrú Fortress after the recent siege. He had initially dismissed them as mere carts, but Ran's reports had shown they were substantially better than carts, and Nobunaga himself had been shocked by how well they performed. They were far more mobile than the carts the Flame Clan had been using until that point. Their ability to accelerate from a dead stop and their maneuverability were worthy of particular note. Furthermore, Nobunaga knew that the Steel Clan had been using wagons as defensive walls in their fighting.

Another staccato burst of explosions rang out from the enemy ranks. But like the previous volley, there were no screams or groans of pain from his own lines.

"Row-man konkreet, was it? Quite tough," Nobunaga remarked.

It was a material that had sustained bombardment from the new province destroyers he had hoped would turn the tide of battle in his favor. Each of the wheelbarrows was loaded to the limit with the Roman concrete from the ruins of Gjallarbrú Fortress. Even the tanegashimas that had the power to punch straight through both sides of iron breastplates weren't able to pierce the piles of rubble upon the wheelbarrows.

"Good. Continue the charge!" he ordered.

With the wheelbarrow companies at their vanguard, the Flame Clan Army continued to close the distance.

Meanwhile at the Steel Clan headquarters...

"A wagon wall charge, huh? He really is full of surprises."

Yuuto furrowed his brow sourly as he processed the reports that had come over the radio. It was a tactic that he had used on Vassarfall's northern division two days ago, though he doubted Nobunaga had chosen to emulate the tactic based on reports from Vassarfall's surviving soldiers. Two days wasn't enough time to come up with an effective defense against gunfire. Nobunaga had to have been preparing his own version of the wagon wall before learning of the battle from two days ago.

"Still, I'd have been dead a long time ago if my own tactics could be used to

defeat me,” Yuuto stated. He had brought a large number of things into Yggdrasil. He had made proper preparations in case they were stolen by his opponents. With that in mind, he continued issuing orders. “Fagrahvél! Pull the arquebusiers back and move the archers to the front!”

“Yes, Your Majesty!” Fagrahvél replied. Her reputation as a great general in Yggdrasil was well-earned. Yuuto’s orders were enough for her to understand precisely what he wanted from her. Soon after, volleys of arrows came flying out from the Steel Clan ranks. They carved an arc through the air and then began falling onto the Flame Clan formation like torrential rain.

“Guh!”

“Gack!”

He heard the screams of the Flame Clan soldiers come over the radio. It seemed switching to bows had the effect he had wanted. While the wagon walls were extremely effective in stopping ground-based attacks, they provided no defense against attacks from the air.

“The Flame Clan forces aren’t slowing! They’re continuing to charge at us without losing any momentum!”

“Well, things would be too easy if this were all it took to beat them.”

Yuuto let out a dry laugh at the scout’s report. The Flame Clan Army was filled with professional soldiers that had been trained over the last decade as dedicated soldiers—a contrast to the armies typically filled using peasant levies that the clans of Yggdrasil often leveraged. While the Flame Clan had conducted a massive conscription effort before this campaign and their ranks had swelled with amateurs, they were likely maintaining their morale and cohesion by putting professional soldiers at the center of their ranks. They were a hard enemy to fight.

“No, wait...” Yuuto furrowed his brow in suspicion as something felt off to him. Wagon walls were technically somewhat capable of defending a force from aerial attacks. The most basic defensive uses of wagon walls relied upon using guns that significantly outranged bows to keep enemies at a distance. Guns were most effective as a defensive weapon, but in the Warring States Period, they had also been used offensively as an opening volley to intimidate the

enemy before a charge. The fact the Flame Clan Army hadn't fired such a volley meant...

"Good news! I can't be certain of it, but the Flame Clan likely has no guns or cannons!" Yuuto exclaimed.

"Truly?!" Fagrahvél responded in shock.

"I can't say for certain, but yes. I'm quite sure of it," he replied.

There was a chance Nobunaga was simply holding them back as a trap, but they were weapons that weren't usable in a pitched melee between two armies. There was no real advantage for them to keep the weapons in reserve.

"Meaning that, currently, we have an advantage in ranged weaponry over the enemy," Yuuto explained.

He heard sharp intakes of breath coming over the radio. This was a massive discovery. From ancient times to the Middle Ages, the weapon that slew the most enemies was not the sword or spear, but the bow and arrow. Up until this point, Yuuto had fought opponents such as Steinþórr and Fagrahvél, with her Gjallarhorn—ones that nullified the advantage of arrow volleys—but weaponry that had substantial range advantages over the enemy should have been enough to turn the tide of battle in their own right.

Historically, during the Hundred Years' War between England and France, the English longbow had been the ultimate weapon, allowing vastly outnumbered English armies to inflict one-sided defeats on French forces. There were even examples such as Crécy, Poitiers, and Agincourt where the French had thousands of dead versus only a few hundred casualties on the English side. Not only did the Steel Clan have the advantage of guns, but their bows had substantially greater range than the Flame Clan's did. He needed to use that to his advantage.

"Right then. Fagrahvél! Slowly back away while firing arrows into the enemy ranks! Do whatever you can to maintain your distance from the enemy! Don't let them get close!" Yuuto ordered.

"My *gasp* Great Lord! The enemy's arrow fire *gasp* is so intense that our

forces can't approach them. A-At this rate, we'll only continue *gasp* to lose soldiers to their arrows."

Nobunaga nodded shortly as the breathless messenger relayed his report to him. However, the fact that his hands were balled tightly into fists belied his intense anger at the situation.

"Hrmph. I see he's at least developed counters to his own tactics," Nobunaga muttered. The Steel Clan soldiers had immediately switched to bows the moment it was clear that guns wouldn't work. They must have already had a contingency plan for if his forces had adopted the wagon wall...

"This volume of arrows was unexpected," he continued. Ordinarily, bows were a weapon that required a great deal of training until the wielders were proficient in their use. As such, it was usually difficult to gather a large number of archers.

"I'm told the Steel Clan utilizes a weapon called an arbalest, yes? They don't have the fire rate of standard bows, but I hear they still have a great deal of power and range even in the hands of an amateur," Salk stated.

"Oh, yes, that's quite true," Nobunaga responded as he scratched at his scalp with a bitter expression. The fact of the matter was that Nobunaga had little knowledge about arbalests. That was because the arbalest—also known as the crossbow—had never evolved in the same way in Japan, despite being widely used across the world, due to a combination of environmental and material factors. By Nobunaga's time in the Warring States Period, their use had practically died out, and no Japanese army equipped their men with them.

His spies had acquired information about the Steel Clan's arbalests, but up until this point, he had simply dismissed them as an inferior version of an arquebus. In fact, Nobunaga's understanding of arbalests was correct. Both arbalests and arquebuses shared one important common trait: relatively unskilled users could outrange and outdamage skilled archers in a short amount of time, and in almost all aspects, the arquebus was superior in performance to the arbalest.

To Nobunaga, who already had a solid understanding of arquebuses and had started mass production of them, arbalests had appeared to be an irrelevant

and obsolete weapon. But there was one area where arbalests were far superior to arquebuses—the ease of procuring ammunition. For arquebuses, the black powder that was necessary to fire its lead ammunition was much harder to procure than the guns themselves.

“I’d dismissed them as a half-baked weapon that was inferior to tanegashimas in range and power, and to bows as far as their rate of fire was concerned, but viewed from a different perspective, they’re easier to wield and have superior range to bows while being easier to secure in large quantities than tanegashimas,” Nobunaga explained.

That meant that they were a weapon that offered an advantage in the most important facet of war: numbers. He had heard they had limitations in terms of rate of fire, but the Steel Clan had probably increased their rate of fire by implementing dedicated loaders, as Nobunaga had done for his tanegashimas. Given the overwhelming volume of arrow fire, the Flame Clan forces, stripped of their guns, were unable to close the distance, and at this rate, he would simply continue to waste his own men for little gain.

“Quite the challenge. Then I suppose we must use our trump card as well. Homura! Take the Akazonae and charge in!” he exclaimed authoritatively.

Homura let out an odd note of surprise, evidently caught completely off guard by Nobunaga’s order. Had it been any other general, it would have triggered an enraged reaction from Nobunaga. But, of course, Nobunaga was extremely sweet to his own children. He simply smiled and smacked her on the back.

“Yep. It’s your chance to make up for your past failure. Go rampage to your heart’s content!” Nobunaga proclaimed.

“Okay!” Homura nodded with a bright smile and dashed off toward the Steel Clan’s ranks. She ran off at a speed that outpaced even the fastest of cavalry, and they lost sight of her almost immediately. One would expect nothing less from a twin-runed Einherjar.

“Are you sure? It’s quite a dangerous assignment,” Old Man Salk asked with a furrowed brow.

While she hadn’t been named Second, it was tacitly acknowledged within the Flame Clan that Homura would be the next patriarch. She was not only

extremely capable as a warrior, but she also had the intelligence and the character to be a ruler. The Flame Clan couldn't afford to lose her, and Old Man Salk's concern was understandable, but Nobunaga confidently laughed off the elder's concern, as though he had not the slightest doubt about her safety.

"Ba ha ha! She's the child I've chosen to succeed me. She won't die so easily," he exclaimed proudly.

"Hm? What's that?!" Peering through her binoculars, Fagrahvél furrowed her brow at the sight ahead. Suddenly, the wagon walls at the front of the Flame Clan formation had divided, and roughly a hundred cavalry troopers began charging toward the Steel Clan. She knew that Nobunaga wasn't simply going to sit idly by and let her cut down his forces with arrows, but this caught even the tactically astute Fagrahvél by surprise. This seemed, to her, like nothing more than a desperate and useless gamble.

"What are they trying to do?!" she yelled in confusion.

Certainly, cavalry were capable of much more powerful charges than infantry given their vastly greater speed and size, and they were a formidable sight for any infantry facing them. However, they were useless against the phalanx, the standard formation used by the Steel Clan. A reckless charge like this would only result in the cavalry being impaled on a wall of spears and leaving behind more bodies. Nobunaga, who employed pike formations that were similar to phalanxes, knew that better than anyone.

"It's best to assume there's something behind their attack. All units, focus on the cavalry!" Fagrahvél ordered.

There was no need to let them pull off whatever they had planned. At Fagrahvél's orders, the Steel Clan rained arrows down upon the Flame Clan cavalry.

"What?!"

Most had missed the target.

"Tch! Again! Don't let them close!"

Fagrahvél once again issued the order to fire, but the arrows once again

completely missed the mark. That was because the enemy cavalry had accelerated the moment the arbalests were about to be fired. While amateurs could be taught to use an arbalest in a short amount of time, it was also true that they were rarely given enough training on the weapon. Though they might be perfectly capable of massed attacks against a large army, they hadn't learned how to read a rapidly moving enemy and aim accordingly. As the arbalests struggled to hit the enemy, the cavalry had rapidly closed the distance.

"I know they're cavalry, but they're moving far too quickly!"

"They're aaall amaaazingly skilled. Suppoooooose they're the Flaaame Claaan's equivaleeent of theeee Múspells."

As Fagrahvél let out an agitated shout, Bára calmly evaluated the approaching enemy. Bára was right—even at this distance, it was easy to see their skill at horsemanship from how easily they rode upon their mounts. They were clearly extremely well-trained.

"Tch! Phalanx companies! Get ready! Impale them..." Fagrahvél stopped midsentence as her eyes caught something in the distance. The Flame Clan cavalry all began to spin a rope that was wrapped around an object at their side using just their wrists. Slings. It was a primitive ranged throwing weapon that had been developed somewhere between 12000 BCE and 8000 BCE that consisted of a rope with a wide center. They were powerful, but if all they were throwing were rocks, the ranks of the Steel Clan army, clad in iron armor, had nothing to worry about from a mere hundred or so slings launched in their direction. But if they carried something other than rocks—

"Message to the front li—!"

Before Fagrahvél could get off her warning, the shattering din of explosions cut her off in midsentence.

"As I feared. Tetsuhau!" Fagrahvél's expression twisted in frustration. Tetsuhau were a relatively easy weapon to make so long as there was black powder available. There was nothing surprising about the Flame Clan having their own. The well-armored nature of the phalangites worked to their disadvantage, and their sheer weight meant quite a number were caught in the

resulting explosions. Just as the tetsuhau disrupted the formations, a triumphant roar filled the air. The Flame Clan cavalry charged into the disordered ranks of Steel Clan infantry. With their formation disrupted, the infantry units were easily cut down.

Unfortunately, that wasn't the entirety of the Flame Clan's assault. A flood of infantry followed, letting out a challenging shout, the ground rumbling beneath their feet as they charged in. They had closed the distance while the Steel Clan had been preoccupied with the cavalry. The arbalest companies assigned to either flank had noticed their approach and unleashed a large barrage of arrows before they were ordered to fire. Countless enemy infantry collapsed in mid-charge as they were torn to shreds by the rain of arrows. However...

"Raaaah! Follow Lady Homura!" a Flame Clan soldier screamed.

"Don't waste this opportunity Lady Homura created!" another yelled.

The Flame Clan soldiers continued to pour in, unfazed by the Steel Clan's arrows. The charge by the patriarch's own daughter had evidently supercharged the enemy's morale. The two armies clashed, devolving into a massive melee.

ACT 2

“So, their cavalry have been equipped with slings to launch tetsuhaus with, huh...” Yuuto groaned when he heard the report.

At least as far as he was aware, no army in history had ever employed such a unit. The closest thing that came to mind was Mongolian cavalry. However, while the Mongolian cavalry had used tetsuhaus during their attempted invasion of Japan, there were no records that indicated they had combined them with slings. A large part of that not occurring was likely due to their culture as a nomadic horse clan that prized skill with the bow over all else. Simply throwing an object from horseback that weighed several kilograms would limit its effective range to perhaps twenty meters at most. However, using a sling would massively increase that range. Even more important was the fact that a sling could easily be wielded with one hand, which meant a rider could launch their projectiles while comfortably maintaining their grip on the horse's reins.

“Dammit! Why didn't I think of it first?” Yuuto clenched his fist in frustration. To him, this situation symbolized the gap he believed existed between himself and Nobunaga. The Steel Clan possessed tetsuhaus, fielded cavalry units, and even made use of slings, though, for some reason, he hadn't thought to combine them. If he was being honest, he had dismissed slings as being too primitive to be effective weapons against the Flame Clan. Slings required a great deal of training to obtain the necessary skill to launch loaded projectiles at their intended target, not to mention the fact that, though they were much better than simply throwing an object, their range was still relatively limited. With all those factors taken into account, Yuuto had believed it was better to refine their designs for their arbalests and catapults so as to improve both their accuracy and range. That line of thinking was perfectly rational. If anything, it would have been the right decision in the long term. However, he had wrongfully discarded slings from his mind entirely.

“Slings really are a perfect weapon for a cavalry unit,” he muttered sourly.

The sheer destructive weight of a cavalry unit's lance charge had been employed as a trump card to break through infantry formations since the earliest days of warfare. However, correctly timing a cavalry charge took a great deal of tactical acumen on the part of the commander. Simply rushing at the enemy headfirst made them easy targets for ranged attacks and spear walls.

Date Masamune had supposedly conceived horseback gunners as a method of overcoming this problem, but it hadn't been a perfect solution. Matchlock guns could only fire a single shot from horseback, and a single volley was rarely enough to break an enemy's line. However, *tetsuhaus* launched with slings would make it possible. The *tetsuhaus*, launched from a distance, would easily break up enemy infantry formations and allow the cavalry to perform a devastating charge into the enemy's ranks.

"Creating something completely new by combining existing technologies... He really is a genius," Yuuto said in awe.

His mind immediately thought back to the invention of the iPod. At the time, all of the technologies used in the iPod had already existed in Japan: touch screens, small hard drives, the necessary internet infrastructure, and a dominant market share and sales network for portable music players. The key thing that had been missing was the unique idea of combining all of those things into a new, unified device. Even if someone *had* come up with the idea, there hadn't yet been a leader capable of making it a reality. The ones who truly revolutionize the world are those who possess both a great deal of creativity and the force of will to see their groundbreaking innovations through. Nobunaga was precisely that kind of person—a warlord of legendary caliber. That was the type of man Yuuto found himself facing off against.

"This is Shadow Nine. The Flame Clan Army units stationed in the east have started their advance!"

"This is Shadow Two. The Flame Clan's western units have entered through Glaðsheimr's western gate."

"Tch, one thing after another," Yuuto grumbled, letting out a dry chuckle as he listened to the reports coming in from the Vindálfs. The timing was perfect. Nobunaga had probably issued the orders just as he had deployed those red

cavalrymen—meaning he was certain of the cavalry's success.

"Big Brother, at this rate we'll be surrounded!" Felicia said, a note of panic clearly present in her voice.

"I know," Yuuto replied coolly.

He had known this would happen when he had learned of Nobunaga's disposition. He had chosen to fight anyway because he had seen this as his only opportunity for victory.

"Fagrahvél! Activate your Gjallarhorn!" he yelled into his radio transceiver.

"Yes, Your Majesty!" a determined voice replied from the other side of the radio.

Gjallarhorn, the Call to War—a rune that increased an entire army's morale and turned its soldiers into fearless berserkers who had no fear of death. It was one of the Steel Clan's greatest trump cards. Yuuto had lost to the Flame Clan in the first Battle of Glaðsheimr despite having employed Gjallarhorn. In reality, though, that loss had occurred as a result of the Flame Clan beginning their attack before the Steel Clan formation was in place.

In a head-on battle, the quality of the Steel Clan's soldiers was equal to their Flame Clan counterparts. If anything, given that the Flame Clan had conscripted a large number of farmers, the Steel Clan's men, on average, were likely better trained than the Flame Clan's. It also bore mentioning that they were fighting in the streets of Glaðsheimr, which limited the advantage provided to the Flame Clan by their massive numbers. All of this meant that Gjallarhorn would allow the Steel Clan forces to overwhelm the Flame Clan invaders. Then there was the fact that it was the main army under Nobunaga that was in front of him.

"Rún! Thír! Attack from both flanks!" Yuuto ordered.

"Yes, Your Majesty!"

"Understood."

He had assigned the pair with a sizable unit each, positioned on either flank of the Flame Clan's expected path. With his orders given, they began their advance with the intention to attack the Flame Clan on its flanks. It was a

variation of Yuuto's favored Hammer and Anvil Strategy—a maneuver he had made use of since his days as Wolf Clan patriarch.

In the grand scheme of things, the Steel Clan Army was currently surrounded by the Flame Clan's forces. However, if the perspective was reframed to focus on the Flame Clan's main body, then the Steel Clan Army was instead encircling the Flame Clan men. This was a golden opportunity!

He was well aware of the risks—he was facing *the* Oda Nobunaga, after all. There was no difference in the two armies' equipment, and even considering just the Flame Clan's main body, their forces still outnumbered him by roughly three times. But there was no way he could win without taking risks. Yuuto took in a breath, then shouted out as he swept his hand forward. "All forces, charge! Bring me Oda Nobunaga's head!"

All the hairs on Nobunaga's body stood on end when he felt it. Back when he was in Japan, Nobunaga had escaped death by a hair's breadth numerous times. He may not have been an Einherjar, but he had a superhuman ability to sense danger. Of course, from Nobunaga's perspective, it was those who lacked this sixth sense for danger that were the slow ones, but...

"It appears that our opponents have rallied themselves quite fiercely..." Salk observed.

"I see you've noticed as well, Salk," Nobunaga replied, smiling with satisfaction at his Second's words. There was nothing more exhausting or tedious than a conversation with someone who couldn't understand things the way he did. Conversations with those who could understand required no explanations and left no misunderstandings. Those were the sorts of conversations Nobunaga preferred.

"From what I've managed to learn, this is the power of the Sword Clan patriarch Fagrahvél's rune, Gjallarhorn," Nobunaga stated.

"I can see why it's often referred to as the Rune of Kings."

"Why that particular name?" Nobunaga asked.

"Ah, it is understandable you wouldn't know of it, My Great Lord. Gjallarhorn

was the rune that the founder of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire, Wotan, possessed,” Salk explained.

“Oh? I can certainly see why it’d be easy to conquer with a power like that,” Nobunaga replied, nodding as though something had clicked in his head. The most troublesome part of battle was managing the morale of the troops. The majority of soldiers ran the moment things turned against them. This rune, however, would turn all of them into fearless warriors. Considering how primitive warfare had been in Yggdrasil when he’d arrived, that ability must have provided an overwhelming advantage.

“Unfortunately for them, they’ve overused it. I already know the rune’s weakness,” Nobunaga stated proudly as his lips curled into a devilish grin.

“By the gods! Truly?!” Salk exclaimed.

“Truly. First of all, there’s a time limit. Secondly, after its use, the troops’ fighting abilities fall precipitously. Of course, these are only based on observations, but I’m quite certain of those weaknesses,” Nobunaga declared confidently. What had cemented these conjectures in his mind were the reports he had received from the survivors of the Battle of Northern Glaðsheimr. “According to reports, the enemy soldiers suddenly grew much more vicious in the middle of the battle. However, toward the end, they’d practically returned to normal. No, if anything, they seemed like they were spent mentally and physically.”

Nobunaga had personally witnessed Gjallarhorn’s powers at the first Battle of Glaðsheimr and the report had lined up with his own observations.

“With my understanding of how I believe the Steel Clan leverages the power of Gjallarhorn, it’s likely that they see this battle as the tipping point in this campaign...” Nobunaga surmised.

He had witnessed firsthand just how good the Steel Clan was at collecting reconnaissance data, both from the siege of Gjallarbrú Fortress and from the guerrilla fighting within Glaðsheimr. No doubt they were already aware that the eastern and western divisions of the Flame Clan Army were approaching. They also had to know that encirclement was the greatest threat to them in battle. Despite that, however, they had chosen to attack. During this second Battle of

Glaðsheimr, the Flame Clan had, on paper at least, been suffering a string of defeats, and it appeared as though the Steel Clan still held the initiative. However, it couldn't have been easy for the Steel Clan. Even if they hadn't lost many men, they had already lost a great deal of equipment, foodstuffs, gunpowder, and the use of Glaðsheimr itself as a fortress. That was why they had decided to gamble everything while they still held the momentum from their recent wins.

"Heh, until two days ago I might have humored him," Nobunaga said with a light chuckle. He imagined in his mind's eye what he would have said. In a battle to decide the ruler of all Yggdrasil, it was vital that he win a head-on battle against Yuuto. Or something along those lines, at least. By now, however, Nobunaga had discarded any such romanticism.

"Message to all units! Hold your formations and focus on defense! Recall Homura as well! The enemy's momentum won't last more than two hours. We survive that and victory is ours!" he proclaimed. He knew that the Steel Clan units would eventually weaken if he simply waited out the effects of Gjallarhorn. There was no reason for him to fight them on their terms. All he needed to do was take the time to ready the ground for victory, weaken the enemy as though smothering them, and win handily after securing the conditions he required. This method had been vital in bringing Nobunaga to the brink of conquering the known world more than once.

"All of you! Follow me!" Sigrún yelled as she spurred her horse and cut her way into the ranks of the Flame Clan Army. Her Múspells followed closely behind on foot. She would have liked to have had all of them on their familiar mounts for a full horseback charge, but the roads that made up the backstreets of the city were much too narrow to lead a large cavalry unit through them. To maintain a force large enough to stand a chance at victory here, she had to sacrifice some of their speed and power. Despite their disadvantageous setup, the Múspells charged in with a powerful roar and began to cut down Flame Clan soldiers with ease. Even on foot, they were some of the best fighters in the Steel Clan.

"Yah!"

“Guh!”

Sigrún’s spear sliced through the air and lopped an enemy’s head clean off his body. She wasn’t fighting like a woman whose dominant hand was injured. “So this is Gjallarhorn. It’s certainly quite impressive,” she observed. Sigrún reversed the swing of her spear and swung it clean through another Flame Clan soldier, nodding contentedly to herself. Not only did the rune’s power boost morale, but it also appeared to enhance physical abilities. Her spear had felt heavy in her hand since she had injured her right hand, but now it felt normal. At the very least, she wouldn’t be a burden in her current state.

“It really is! It’s like my strength is just bubbling up from deep within me. I feel like I can take out anyone like this!” Hildegard said brightly as she swung her spear in every which direction like a whirlwind of death. She was still young, in her mid-teens, but she was an Einherjar, and in terms of combat ability, she ranked only second to Sigrún among the Múspells. Well, only physically speaking, of course. With a sharp clang, Sigrún’s spear deflected a knife that was just about to hit Hildegard in the eye.

“Stay focused, Hilda! It’s when you let things go to your head that you always make stupid mistakes!” Sigrún yelled.

“I-I saw that coming! I planned to dodge it at the last second to look cool!” Hildegard replied.

“Uh-huh...” Sigrún said with a tone of skepticism.

“It’s true!” Hildegard protested.

“Even if you *are* telling the truth, don’t let yourself get distracted.” Sigrún then paused and, without turning her head, thrust the back end of her spear behind her. The Flame Clan soldier who had been trying to attack her from behind was thrown backward with a cry of pain. Sigrún then used that impact to land a thrust into the throat of the soldier in front of her. She pulled out the spearhead without so much as raising a brow.

“Don’t play around on the battlefield. A split-second decision can be the difference between life and death,” Sigrún barked.

“Yes ma’am...” Hildegard replied languidly.

Hildegard, annoyed about being lectured by Sigrún, took out her frustration on the soldiers in front of her, sweeping them aside together with a single swing of her spear. It was as though a giant bear had swiped the group of soldiers down. Hildegard had always been far stronger than the average Einherjar. With the effects of Gjallarhorn augmenting that strength even further, she was now supernaturally powerful.

“A-Ack...”

“W-What the hell are they...?!”

“M-Monsters!”

“The order was to hold the line, but how?!”

Even the Flame Clan soldiers, known for their bravery and toughness, found themselves on the back foot against these opponents. The pair in front of them looked to all the world like slender, beautiful young women. However, each of them fought with the strength of at least a company of normal soldiers. No matter how well-trained the Flame Clan men were, it was impossible for them to avoid feeling a sense of awe, and dread, at seeing them. As a veteran of hundreds of battles—this despite her youth—she was never going to miss the Flame Clan soldiers’ momentary lapse of composure.

“Those afar, hear my voice! Those near, witness me! I am Sigrún, Mánagarmr of the Steel Clan!” she shouted out, fanning the embers of fear that had taken root in the enemy. Her yell had its intended effect, and panic spread through the enemy ranks. “Run if you wish to live. I won’t pursue any who flee! But if you fight me, all that awaits you is death!” Sigrún continued to cut down the enemy as though to prove her words.

“Yaaaah! I am Sigrún’s protégé and the successor to the Mánagarmr, Hildegard the Flame-Haired Beast! Only those who wish to become rust on my blade should stand before me!” Hildegard, too, shouted out at the enemy from next to Sigrún. Although Sigrún had no memory of ever naming Hildegard her successor, nor had she ever heard the nickname Flame-Haired Beast, now wasn’t the time to point either of those things out. That said...

“Ahhhh!”

“Heeeelp!”

Hildegard was able to live up to that nickname. As far as pure physical strength went, Hildegard was much more powerful than Sigrún, and her mighty spear strikes were perfectly suited for taking on large groups of enemies. Furthermore, unlike when she had first joined the Múspell Unit, she wasn’t just using brute force to defeat her enemies. After more than a year of intense training under Sigrún, her spearplay now showed great mastery of technique—it was practically an art form. She also knew Sigrún’s movements and fighting style better than anyone. There was no one Sigrún could trust more to have her back.

“Yaaaah!”

“Raaaagh!”

This partnership wasn’t something rank-and-file soldiers had any hope of stopping. With the pair at the vanguard, the Múspell Unit continued cutting into the enemy lines.

However, sharp clangs of metal striking metal signaled the end of their easy advance. Two cavalymen stood before them, blocking their spear strikes. Both wore flamboyantly red armor. One was a young man in his midtwenties, while the other was a man of around thirty with a scruffy, unkempt beard. Sigrún’s first impression was that they were large. In Yggdrasil, the average adult man’s height was around 150 centimeters, but both of the men before her were at least a head or two taller than that average. They were also extremely well-built, with hulking muscles. They clearly appeared to be of a different class of warrior than the soldiers they had been fighting to this point.

“Hraaaah!”

“Raaah!”

Sigrún stopped her mount and she exchanged several more blows with them, but her opponent stopped all of her strikes. It had been the same with Hildegard.

“Be careful, Hilda! These aren’t ordinary soldiers. They’re powerful, even compared to Einherjar like us.”

“Thanks for stating the obvious!” Hildegard said with annoyance as she crossed spears with the bearded man. Their spears clanged against one another, ricocheting backward as both Hildegard and the man were thrown off-balance. That meant Hildegard’s opponent was strong enough to match her Gjallarhorn-boosted strength.

“Let’s hear your names,” Sigrún asked as she took her distance, determining that neither would be easy to defeat. It was clear that both of them were famous Einherjar in their own right.

“It’s an honor for the famous Sigrún to ask for my name. I’m one of the Five Swords of the Flame Clan, Ryusai. I’ve wanted to fight you ever since I heard you defeated Lord Shiba,” the young man said with a friendly smile that felt extremely out of place in battle.

“My name is Arako. I, too, am one of the Five Swords of the Flame Clan,” the bearded man laconically stated his own name.

“No wonder you’re so skilled.”

The Five Swords of the Flame Clan was the name given to the five greatest warriors in the Flame Clan. The Flame Clan was a giant clan. There were at least several dozen Einherjar among their number. The Five Swords were the most elite among those. Of course they were going to be powerful.

“Hey, hey. You’ve already started without me? C’mon now, that’s no fair.”

“You’re late, Gatu.”

“You’re always so slow. Get it together.”

A third man dressed in the same crimson armor as the other two joined them. The first two were handsome men with well-proportioned bodies, but this man was short, squat, and wide. He was not to be underestimated, however. The newly arrived man, Gatu, swung his spear as though to warm up. The spear blade whistled as it cut through the air. That alone was enough to know: this man was even stronger than the first two.

“Is a victory against these men even possible? I’m still injured, and Hilda has minimal experience against opponents of this caliber...” Sigrún weighed the question in her mind. She knew from personal experience just how powerful

the first among the five, Shiba, had been. Despite having only possessed a single rune, he had been a monster that was equal to, or perhaps even greater than, Steinþórr the twin-runed Einherjar. She had also heard that Hyuga, one of the Five Swords who had been at the Battle of Northern Glaðsheimr, had required the Maidens of the Waves to fight as a group to defeat him—and even then, two of them had been wounded.

These three were on the same level as those two. Although Gjallarhorn was enhancing her physical abilities, Sigrún's right hand was injured, and as such, she could only fight with her left arm. Furthermore, they were outnumbered three to two. This seemed, by all accounts, to be a fight that would be incredibly difficult to win.

Meanwhile, Thír, who commanded the left flank, had also run into a powerful enemy.

“Aww, I came here looking for powerful people to fight, but I guess I picked the wrong army,” a girl of perhaps ten years of age, someone who looked completely out of place on the battlefield, said with a disappointed pout of her lips. Her voice and words conveyed how young she still was. However, the bodies of the Steel Clan soldiers scattered around her clearly indicated she was a dangerous opponent. She also radiated an incredibly powerful aura. Thír had never met her in person, but she knew the girl's name: Homura. She was the beloved daughter of the enemy ruler Oda Nobunaga and a twin-runed Einherjar of extraordinary power...

ACT 3

Caught in a barrage of tetsuhau explosions, the attacking Flame Clan forces shrank back in fear, leading them to retreat soon after. However, Haugspori looked far from pleased at the outcome.

“Gods, they really did get one over on us, huh...” Haugspori said as he let out a long sigh of frustration. A second look at the events unfolding showed him that none of the Flame Clan soldiers had been injured by the explosions. After all, they knew from bitter experience that the Steel Clan made extensive use of tetsuhau. That was why they were trying to bait the Steel Clan forces into wasting their tetsuhau. If they succeeded in doing so, they could then attempt to wipe out the Steel Clan Army, who would find their position greatly weakened without their explosives.

Tetsuhau were powerful—a single one exploding within the assembled ranks of a spear wall would injure around ten soldiers at a time. Even though the Flame Clan enjoyed a massive numerical advantage, the threat of tetsuhau bombardments was still greatly concerning to them. Haugspori had to admit it was an appropriate tactic for the circumstances.

“Looks like they saw right through us...” Haugspori muttered. Had he been the enemy commander, he would have used a similar tactic. Up until this point, the Steel Clan had made extensive use of gunpowder. Two recent examples of this included setting southern Glaðsheimr on fire, as well as the tetsuhau used against the northern Flame Clan forces. Gunpowder was a difficult item to manufacture and was particularly challenging to store in large quantities. Furthermore, the Steel Clan was currently surrounded and under siege. Their remaining stock of gunpowder was low—things were dire.

“I really drew the short straw, didn’t I? Holding the enemy here is going to be quite the task.”

Haugspori’s assignment was to prevent the Flame Clan’s eastern army from advancing farther into the city, so as to keep them from intervening in the

battle between the two Clans' main armies in southern Glaðsheimr. That said, he was facing off against an enemy force of twenty thousand with a little over two thousand soldiers of his own. Obviously, he wasn't going to do anything as foolish as clash head-on with their forces, but with a ten-to-one disadvantage, the situation was still grim. As Haugspori considered his options, a powerful battle cry erupted from the Flame Clan lines.

"Tch, more already? Fine. The next bunch are empty anyways!"

The arbalests sang out again, and scores of balls sailed through the air. The advancing Flame Clan army suddenly stopped and retreated backward in good order. Haugspori couldn't help but find it irritating.

"Hah! Seems they've fallen for *our* tricks this time," Haugspori said with a smugly triumphant smile. The projectiles landed on the ground, and all of them shattered without a single explosion among them. They weren't duds; they simply hadn't been filled with gunpowder.

"All warfare is deception,' right?"

It was a lesson from Sun Tzu's *Art of War* that Linnea often referred to—one she had learned from Yuuto. The specific tactic they were using in this battle was one that had been developed by Hveðrungr before the recent Battle of Northern Glaðsheimr. The Flame Clan's soldiers had repeatedly dealt with the Steel Clan's use of tetsuhau against them, so Hveðrungr proposed that they would mistake empty pottery for tetsuhau. As he had predicted, it had worked like a charm. The Flame Clan had no choice but to worry about the Steel Clan's use of tetsuhau and slow their advance in order to reduce casualties.

"Let's make the next two volleys blanks too," Haugspori ordered. Fortunately, there was a practically endless supply of empty pottery in the now-abandoned city. There was no need to worry about wasting ammunition.

"A-Are you certain that's a good idea, sir?!" his Second asked incredulously. Haugspori knew from his Second's expression what had prompted that question.

"You're thinking that if we keep doing this, they'll realize we're bluffing, am I right?" Haugspori asked his Second.

“Y-Yes,” the Second responded meekly.

“Don’t worry about that. If anything, we’d like them to think that way. Oh, here they come,” Haugspori replied.

The Flame Clan’s eastern division surged forward again, and when the arbalests fired, they shrank back like a retreating wave. The same series of events repeated twice over, but then, a change in their behavior occurred...

Unusually, the Flame Clan soldiers accelerated their charge when Haugspori’s forces fired on them. The pottery being launched pelted at the Flame Clan soldiers’ shields, and what was left of the pottery clattered to the ground. None of them had exploded. The Flame Clan Army’s advance hadn’t stopped either.

“Got you. Now give them a taste of the real thing!” Haugspori ordered. Shortly after, blasts echoed through the air.

“Ahhhh!”

“What the?!”

“Hot! Hot!”

The Flame Clan soldiers who had assumed the next volley would also be empty were caught up in the salvo of explosives and began to panic.

“Finish them off! Give them another full salvo!” Haugspori yelled to his men once more. More explosions rang across the battlefield.

“Ahhhhh!”

“Aaack!”

“Dammit! They were supposed to be out of gunpowder!”

The Flame Clan Army fell into a disorganized panic, and their men began withdrawing as frightened screams could be heard throughout its ranks. They certainly didn’t seem like the professional soldiers that the Flame Clan was known for. It was very likely that these units were made up of conscripted farmers. They had been sent in to act as sacrificial lambs to find out if the Steel Clan forces truly had run out of tetsuhau.

“I suppose it’s only natural that they’d be cautious about us doing something

like this,” the Second observed.

They had not only been able to confirm what state the Steel Clan Army was in while only sacrificing their least effective units, but they had also baited the Steel Clan into using tetsuhau on those men. The eastern division’s commander was quite the tactician, combining a cautious personality with the ruthlessness to throw his men to the wolves when necessary.

“Little do they know that their actions have already been accounted for...” Haugspori muttered to himself, chuckling all the while. As noted earlier, Haugspori’s forces weren’t looking to claim a victory; they were there to keep the eastern division from interfering in the clash between the Flame and Steel Clan Armies’ main bodies. All they needed to do was to buy time. The more cautious the enemy became, the easier it became for Haugspori to achieve that goal.

It was all going according to Hveðrungr’s plan. Right now, the forces under Narfi’s command in western Glaðsheimr were using the same tactics to slow down the western division of the Flame Clan Army. Narfi had been Hveðrungr’s subordinate since Hveðrungr’s days as the Panther Clan’s patriarch, and had also served as the Second of the Independent Cavalry Regiment. He was well versed in hit-and-run tactics and was an Einherjar himself. There was no doubt he’d be doing his job of stopping the enemy in their tracks there as well.

“His Majesty really is a hell of a man. I suppose that bastard in the mask is too,” Haugspori said to himself.

When Haugspori had seen the tactic used in the battle against the northern division, he had only considered it a bluff that might be useful once, but he had been mistaken. If anything, it was a tactic that showed its true effectiveness when they were on the defensive and needed to slow the enemy even as they were short on both manpower and ammunition. It was clear why Yuuto had been unstinting in his praise of Hveðrungr’s proposal. They had both foreseen that this would be how it would play out.

“Just how many steps ahead have they been planning?” Haugspori murmured as he felt a cold shiver run up his spine. Those two were frightening men to deal with. “That said, how long can we maintain this?”

The fact of the matter was that his forces were, in fact, running short on tetsuhau. Even with the use of the empty pottery, there was a limit to how much longer they could hold out. It was clear the Steel Clan didn't have much time left.

"Such overwhelming ásmegin... Just being in her presence makes me feel as though I'm going to be crushed by it," Thír said nervously, swallowing the lump she suddenly felt in her throat. The opponent before her was still just a child. Even so, simply looking at this child made her body tense in fear. It was as though she were facing off against the legendary great wolves, the garmrs that were said to live in the Himinbjörg Mountains.

"One, two, three, four, five, six... Huh, six Einherjar? That's a lot." Homura pointed at each of the Einherjar with her index finger before nodding with admiration. There was perhaps one Einherjar out of every ten thousand people. Given their rarity, it was pretty much impossible to run into six individuals together at once as an enemy.

"This is sooooo boring! I've gotta go find that masked Hvesomething guy. I can't let someone else get him." Homura pouted with displeasure. It seemed she was wrapped up in her own thoughts, and she had left herself so open that Thír and the others were caught by surprise.

One of the Maidens of the Waves saw the opening and charged in toward Homura to take advantage of it. No, it was more accurate to say that her fear had forced her into looking for any opportunity to find a way to win.

"U-Uōr, wait!" Thír hurriedly tried to stop her—but the warning came far too late. Homura's lightning-quick strike sent Uōr's head flying through the air.

"Huh? You can't even block that? What's wrong with you? Aren't you an Einherjar?" Homura, who had just killed Uōr, seemed most surprised by the outcome. For Uōr's sake, it needed to be said that she wasn't weak. While there were plenty of Einherjar who simply relied on their natural talent and didn't bother to train, Uōr, as a member of the Maidens of the Waves, had undergone harsh training under Thír from a young age. She was at least equal to Haugspori of the Brisingamen of the Horn Clan, or Yuuto's adjutant and bodyguard Felicia.

Despite that, Homura had still dispatched her with a single blow.

“That can’t... No... Uōr!” Thír honestly wasn’t able to fully process what had happened in front of her. She had just lost one of her beloved daughters, but it had happened so quickly—so easily—that it didn’t feel real. She couldn’t believe it. She simply wasn’t able to believe it.

“U-Uōr! We’ll avenge you!”

“Ah! Hold!” When she heard the shout of rage from another of the Maidens of the Waves, Thír snapped back into the present and hurriedly stopped them from attacking. “That girl is a twin-runed Einherjar. Reckless attacks will only get you killed!”

Thír had never faced him directly, but during a victory party, Haugspori, the Assistant Second of the Horn Clan, had told her stories of the monstrous strength of the Lightning Clan patriarch Steinpórr. According to Haugspori, even when seven Einherjar had surrounded him and attacked him in tandem, Steinpórr had still brushed them aside with ease. Among those seven had been the late Skáviðr, a man who had been reputed to be equal, perhaps even superior, to Sigrún, the Mánagarmr—and still, he had pulled through. Though the young girl in front of her was probably not at that level yet, she still remained an opponent against whom even the most cautious approaches could be considered reckless.

“We’ll attack together. Don’t underestimate her just because she’s a child. There’s no need to feel any guilt. Use any means at your disposal!” Thír rapidly shot out the orders. She kept her eyes glued on Homura. She remained focused on the girl to make certain she caught every movement. It quickly paid off. She caught Homura’s motions as she made her move. However, Homura accelerated far faster than Thír had thought possible.

With a powerful roar, Hildegard exchanged blows with the enemy Einherjar. What had his name been? Ryusai? He seemed a frivolous sort—a man in his midtwenties whose every remark seemed to be some lighthearted comment.

Despite the man’s mannerisms, Hildegard was the one who lost the test of strength and flinched backward with her upper body. The shock from her

impact numbed her fingers. While it was by the smallest margin, his blows were more powerful than her own—despite the fact that Hildegard’s physical abilities had been amplified by Gjallarhorn. She quickly realized that, on even terms, he was stronger than she was.

“Raaaah!”

Ryusai brought his spear downward to follow up on his previous blow. Still off-balance, Hildegard wasn’t going to be able to block it in time.

“Tch!”

Hildegard spurred her horse and had her beloved mount charge forward. The horses butted heads and shoved the enemy soldiers backward.

“Phew, thanks, Skuld.” Hildegard let out a breath of relief and gently patted the mane of her beloved horse. She had escaped danger at the last moment, but the exchange had been enough to make her crotch tingle.

“Oh my, you’re quite good for being so cute. I’d love to take you as my bride,” Ryusai said casually as he bounced his spear on his shoulder. Hildegard felt a strong surge of irritation at his attitude, but she somehow managed to keep it controlled. She was already at a disadvantage. If she lost her calm here, she’d lose any chance of winning.

“*How’s Mother Rún doing...?*” she thought to herself. Hildegard kept most of her attention on Ryusai, but she glanced sideward at her mentor. Sigrún, too, was in the midst of a savage exchange against the remaining two enemy Einherjar. They were clearly holding the advantage. That, too, was perhaps unavoidable. Sigrún’s dominant hand wasn’t working properly, and she was facing two enemies at once.

“She’s impressive too. It takes something special to hold up in a fight against those two simultaneously. I can see why she was able to take out Uncle Shiba,” Ryusai said, making his admiration clear as he noticed Hildegard’s glance. Hildegard felt her brows twitch.

“Don’t be—Mrrrgph!”

She bit back on the shout that threatened to explode from her mouth.

“Don’t be ridiculous! If Mother Rún were in perfect shape, they’d be long dead, you dumbass!” she screamed internally. The Flame Clan should still be unaware of Sigrún’s injury. There was no need to inform the enemy of an ally’s vulnerability.

“And there are few women as beautiful. I wish I could’ve fought her instead,” Ryusai said with a disappointed sigh.

“Then why’d you let those two pass so easily?” Hildegard asked.

“Well, it’d be totally embarrassing to be seen fighting two on one against a slender little thing like her,” Ryusai replied and winked with an impish grin. Hildegard felt an immediate shiver of revulsion. There was something about him she had disliked from the start, but this had settled her impression of him.

“Hrmph! I’m a ‘slender little thing’ too, you know,” she rebutted.

“Hah! Well, if you wanna run, you can run. I won’t chase. Since we’re on the battlefield, I’ll deal with inconveniences when I run into them, but honestly, I’m not a big fan of killing women,” Ryusai explained.

“I-Is that so?” she replied. She knew her voice was quivering from her pent-up rage. That latest comment had really pissed her off. Part of it was the fact that he looked down on her for being a woman, but the most annoying thing he’d done was suggest that she was little more than a mere inconvenience. That wasn’t something she could let pass.

“Oh, or do you want to surrender? Why don’t you become my bride?” Ryusai said mockingly.

Snap!

“Hell no!” she screamed. With that roar, their battle resumed.

“She better not be losing her temper...” Sigrún couldn’t help but furrow her brow as she heard a familiar shout behind her. Her protégé and apprentice Hildegard’s greatest weakness was her cockiness. Hildegard had made a habit of letting her emotions get the better of her in the moment, which would result in her losing her cool and making a serious mistake. Ordinarily, Sigrún would be there to back her up, but this time, that wasn’t so easy to do...

“Worrying about someone else, are you? You keeping some of your strength back in reserve?”

“Heh, that’s what makes you such a worthy challenge.”

The scruffily bearded Arako and the densely built Gatu thinned their lips in concentration and glared in her direction. It seemed she had inadvertently taunted them. Truthfully, Sigrún was running on fumes. She had already entered the Realm of Godspeed to deal with the pair’s intense rush of attacks.

“Here we go!”

“Graaaaah!”

“Tch! Hrmph!”

She deflected Arako’s spear thrust upward, then used the Willow Technique to avoid Gatu’s downward slash. Not a moment later, she managed to avoid Arako’s follow-up attack by a hair’s breadth, and also somehow managed to block Gatu’s sweeping slash before he was able to put his strength behind it. The whole exchange had been over in an instant. Her almost divine ability to defend against their attacks was due entirely to the fact she was in the Realm of Godspeed.

“How much longer will my body hold up...?” she wondered with great worry.

More than anything, using the Realm of Godspeed was extremely physically draining. Worse, she was just managing to keep the two at bay despite using her trump card. She had no physical or mental bandwidth to attack. While her stamina was still holding up fine, it was clear that the longer this went, the worse things would get.

“If only I could use the Realm of the Water Mirror...”

What she was mulling over in her mind was a technique she had developed during her duel with Shiba that allowed her to read the enemy’s intentions before they attacked, but with this many enemies around her, she wasn’t able to tell the intentions of those she was facing apart from the countless soldiers around her.

“No point in wishing for something I don’t...have!”

She switched over her thought process and continued to defend against the onslaught of enemy strikes. Dodge. Deflect. Block. Hold off the enemy with a feint. She used the full extent of her skills to avoid their attacks.

“Too slow. You’re making me sleepy,” Sigrún said mockingly.

“Grrr!”

“Know your place, girl!”

The pair’s glares intensified as Sigrún continued to taunt them. The more desperate the situation, the more important it was to show confidence and suggest she had strength in reserve. That had been the ultimate technique that her mentor Skáviðr had taught her to escape perilous situations. It was having its intended effect. Caution had made her opponents hesitant to commit too heavily to an attack, and their anger had made their attacks less refined.

“Far too slow!” she said as she chuckled at them. *“What is that fool doing?!”* she added mentally at the end of her laughter. The fool, it went without saying, was Hildegard. She was fighting two opponents with an injured right hand. Hildegard was fighting one-on-one. It was beyond obvious who had the higher chance of winning. If Hildegard got on with defeating the enemy she was fighting and came to her aid, they’d then be back to one-on-one and stood a chance of victory.

“As if I actually need someone to help me. Seems I’m getting old...”

She couldn’t help but let out a self-deprecating chuckle. It had always been her ethos to cut open the path to victory with her own hand. Still, she felt no discomfort over her realization. If anything, it felt right. Sigrún had never told Hildegard directly and had no intention of telling her in the future, but she had the greatest confidence in Hildegard’s skill. She even considered Hildegard to be a hugely promising warrior that would eventually surpass her.

Certainly, the Five Blades of the Flame Clan were challenging opponents, but Hildegard had the skill to win. Sigrún held a steadfast faith in that fact and had entrusted her life to it. She had no hesitation about doing so. She knew it provided the highest chance of survival. The reason was simple: Hildegard was the beloved apprentice she had trained herself.

“They’ve broken through our second formation!” a Flame Clan scout reported in a panic.

“Ah, I’d heard stories about them, but it’s almost overwhelming when witnessing it in person,” Old Man Salk responded, his deeply wrinkled features furrowing further as he frowned. He was the oldest of the Flame Clan’s generals, and he had seen his fair share of conflict over the years. In the time since his first battle—a long sixty years ago—he had never seen anything like the momentum the Steel Clan was putting on display.

The Flame Clan based their infantry tactics around pike squares formed by concentrated formations of soldiers equipped with long spears. These formations were essentially walls of spears. By all accounts, they should have been difficult to overcome, but...

“The enemy’s broken through the third formation! We can’t stop them!”

The Steel Clan attackers continued to break through the Flame Clan’s formations with little difficulty. Gjallarhorn’s nickname, the Rune of Kings, was well-earned, clearly. Salk, with his vast battlefield experience, was certain there were few abilities that were this deadly in a clash of armies. It was a power that, by all rights, belonged in a place far beyond the realm of ordinary men. It was something that was more aptly expected from the gods themselves.

“So I can see...” Nobunaga replied, holding his composure as he watched the situation unfold. There was no trace of anxiety in his voice. It was reassuring to see.

“What shall we do, My Great Lord? At this rate, they’ll take us with their momentum,” Salk asked despite his certainty that it wouldn’t happen. He was simply curious as to how Nobunaga intended to deal with the enemy attack.

“We’ll stay the course,” Nobunaga replied.

“Pardon?” Salk blurted out, clearly confused.

“I’ve seen this ability multiple times. I’ve made the necessary preparations to deal with it.” Nobunaga calmly explained. Soon after, his lips curled into a feral grin. His thought process was perfectly reasonable: the rune’s power was one of the Steel Clan’s most powerful weapons, meaning that the Flame Clan needed

to overcome it to have any chance of victory. Nobunaga, being a man to choose to fight only when he was certain he could win, had long since prepared a method for dealing with it.

“And those preparations are?” Salk asked.

“Hrmph. Keep watching and I’m sure you’ll notice,” Nobunaga replied curtly.

“Is that so? I’ll be sure to observe closely.” Salk had no choice but to sit back and watch, given Nobunaga’s immense confidence. Any further questions would only irritate his liege.

He had decided to wait and watch, however...

“They’ve broken through our fourth formation!”

“Our fifth formation reports the enemy has broken through!”

A stream of bad news continued to come down from the front lines. Surely this was a problem. Old Man Salk couldn’t contain his anxiety and looked over at Nobunaga, who, to his surprise, still appeared perfectly calm. It was at that moment Salk’s brain made the connection.

“Surely not... Is this the infinite spiral formation?!” Salk exclaimed.

“Ah, so you’ve noticed,” Nobunaga said with an amused chuckle. The infinite spiral formation—a defensive formation that Vassarfall, one of the Five Division Commanders of the Flame Clan, had developed. It relied upon using almost-countless layers of defensive formations to stifle the enemy’s advance. It was much easier to describe than it was to actually execute. That was because it was extremely difficult to maintain an army’s morale as the enemy continually broke through their successive defensive lines. This was why, even among the Flame Clan’s numerous skilled generals, Vassarfall had been the only one who had been able to pull it off. For Nobunaga to be managing to do so with such ease came as a shock to Old Man Salk. Once again, he was forced to admit Nobunaga was a monstrously talented commander.

“Well, it’s not quite the same thing,” Nobunaga said with a dry laugh, as though he had read Salk’s mind.

“How so?” Salk replied.

“The infinite spiral formation is a tactic that’s only possible by notifying the troops beforehand and drilling them over a long period of time to understand their role. Even I can’t use it without some long-term preparation,” Nobunaga explained.

“That makes sense. Being able to pull something like that off with no prior setup would require nothing short of a miracle,” Salk said in apparent agreement.

“As such, I made the decision to divide the forces in two. A ragtag force that consists of conscripts, and a second, more disciplined force filled with highly trained soldiers who are dedicated to fighting.”

“I see! So the ones who are fighting on the vanguard right now are the conscripts?!”

“Precisely! As a result, it won’t matter how many men we lose, since our main fighting force will remain unscathed.”

Salk felt a shiver run up his spine as Nobunaga stated the situation so baldly. Given that the conscripts had received, at most, a month and a half of training, they had no chance against the reinforced soldiers of the Steel Clan. The battles currently occurring on the front lines must have been something close to a one-sided slaughter.

Nobunaga had sacrificed twenty thousand conscripts to buy time against the Steel Clan. It was a ruthless and coldly calculated tactic worthy of his moniker of demon lord. Brutal though it was, the fact of the matter was that it *was* effective. The Flame Clan Army’s highly trained career soldiers had naturally developed a sense of superiority over their conscripted peers. Their belief that they were better must have been strengthened by the fact they had seen just how poorly the conscripts did in their training over the last month. They would likely dismiss the defeat of the conscripted units as the natural outcome of sending farmers into battle, coldly regarding them as inferior warriors to themselves. They had, after all, put in years of training to reach their current positions—meaning that even if the twenty thousand conscripts were routed and fled, it wouldn’t impact the morale of the twenty thousand professional soldiers stationed behind them. Nobunaga’s plan was to preserve his trained

elites as a reserve force and send them against the Steel Clan Army when they were on the verge of defeat. It was a tactic that showed Nobunaga's willingness to pay a price in blood to finish the enemy.

"I had no illusions things would go as planned, but still... An army led by Oda Nobunaga himself is one hell of an opponent," Yuuto murmured to himself, his expression set in a frown as he commanded the Steel Clan forces from the rear.

Though the Flame Clan forces had been on the offensive when he had ordered the use of Gjallarhorn, they had quickly switched to a defensive posture. The crimson-armored unit that had forced the armies into a melee had also immediately withdrawn and moved to the flanks to serve as reinforcements. Most impressively, Nobunaga had done all this without the omniscience that was granted to Yuuto by his runes that allowed him to detect the enemy's location and movements. Nobunaga's ability to read the battlefield was practically unrivaled. There was a reason he had been able to take a small clan in the Warring States Period and elevate them to such a mighty position that they had gotten to the cusp of conquering the country as a whole.

"Trying to come up with any underhanded schemes at this point would likely end up backfiring," Yuuto remarked. Trickery in battle was only useful if it caught the enemy by surprise. If they were ready for the planned deception, it was more likely they'd be able to use any such ruses to their advantage.

"This was perhaps a bit reckless?" Kristina coolly pointed out. She remained one of the retainers who was willing to state the truth without artifice. Of course, that was why she was so valuable...

"I knew that going into this. However, this is the only way we can win," Yuuto replied.

Yes, he knew this was a long shot from the start. Even with the power of Gjallarhorn, a frontal assault against an enemy army twice the size of his own was madness. But the die had been cast. Any uncertainty from him now would make his soldiers anxious and create panic among them.

"We need to throw everything we can into this. Send all our forces forward. I'll step up to the front as well," Yuuto ordered.

“No! That would be too dangerous!” Kristina protested.

“If anything, staying back now is a bigger risk,” he responded.

Because Gjallarhorn was still in effect, it was unlikely that Yuuto’s presence on the front lines would improve morale. Even so, he wanted to get a closer look at the enemy’s movements. There were still things he was going to miss from the audio-only reports he was receiving over the radio. The only way to truly feel the flow of battle was to be close to the fighting itself. After all, he was fighting against Oda Nobunaga. A single mistake might end up surrendering the battle to him. He couldn’t afford to miss a single change.

“Though I say this much, a frontal assault is probably not going to work out,” Yuuto conceded.

That was where the enemy’s numbers were greatest, and they were now in a defensive formation. Not to mention that the feeling of being stuck in an infinite loop was familiar. It was the same defensive formation Vassarfall had employed in their recent battle. It wasn’t realistic to hope that they could break through it in the time they had left. He needed something that would tip the scales in his favor.

“I’m counting on you, Rún, Thír,” he said hopefully to nobody in particular.

The only ones he could think of who could do such a thing were those two. Sigrún’s Múspell Unit and Thír’s Maidens of the Waves were head and shoulders above the rest of the Steel Clan forces in terms of offensive power and penetrative strength. Yuuto’s only remaining option was to trust them to create the necessary opening.

“Hyah, hyah, hyah!”

With a loud roar, Hildegard let loose with a series of thrusts. She was moving so quickly that an average soldier would have seen the three thrusts as a single thrust. However...

“Aha! That was a little close.”

Although Ryusai let out a note of surprise, he easily blocked all three blows. And unlike his words, his expression showed that it hadn’t been particularly

challenging for him. Hildegard felt her brow twitch in irritation.

“Screw you!”

With that shout, Hildegard swung her spear downward in a diagonal slash. Ryusai responded with a swing of his own and deflected her blow. They then began exchanging spear blows on horseback. Ten. Twenty. Thirty blows. The duel seemed far from a conclusion. Hildegard was the only one attacking. At a glance, it appeared she had the advantage, but the reality was the opposite.

“Agh! Blast it! Stop defending and attack already! You been gelded, you eunuch?!”

“Ha ha, it’s precisely because I’m not a eunuch that I won’t attack a girl,” Ryusai said with a laugh as he defended against Hildegard’s assault. Yes, the only reason Hildegard was the only one attacking was that Ryusai was focused on defense and wasn’t bothering to counterattack.

“Liar! You were attacking me at first!” she yelled.

“Oh? I don’t remember that,” he replied mockingly.

“Grrr!”

Hildegard felt a fresh surge of irritation at Ryusai’s nonchalance. His easy confidence forced her to confront reality. He was reading her attacks with great precision. It was because he was absolutely certain she couldn’t kill him that Ryusai was now prioritizing his philosophy of not killing women. Hildegard couldn’t imagine a greater insult.

“Don’t get so mad. Smile more. You’re so cute when you do, Hilda,” Ryusai stated.

“Hraaagh! Don’t you dare call me Hilda!” she replied in a fit of rage.

“That’s quite enough, Hilda!” An angry shout cut off Hildegard’s roar of anger. The clear, ringing voice that cut through the sounds of battle wiped all traces of anger from Hildegard’s mind. It was practically a Pavlovian response. Just the sound of that voice reflexively made Hildegard’s mind and body shrink back. That voice, after all, had lectured her day in and day out. “Stop playing around and finish him! How much longer are you going to make me wait?!”

Sigrún shouted at her even as she faced off against two opponents of her own. Sigrún's face was drenched with sweat. She was breathing heavily, her shoulders rising and falling with each breath. With her injured right hand, she was far from full strength. Yet despite that, she was holding her own against two of the Five Blades of the Flame Clan. The beautifully refined movements of her mentor triggered a memory in Hildegard's mind.

The following events occurred a year ago, shortly after Hildegard had joined the Múspell Unit.

“Yeow!”

On that particular day, Hildegard, as usual, was busily training under Sigrún's tutelage. Hildegard was doubled over in pain after Sigrún had landed a thrust against her head. Sigrún was skilled enough to have stopped the attack before making contact, but because she valued the feel of actual combat, she often made a point to let her blows connect. Of course, she was still probably holding back, but it still hurt.

“Not good enough. You need more training. Next!”

Sigrún turned away from Hildegard and held out her wooden sword to face her next opponent. She was neither sweating nor breathing particularly heavily. It was clear she wasn't fighting at anything close to full strength.

“How can she do that when I'm putting everything into it?!” Hildegard thought to herself, a surge of anger rising within her at that realization. She gripped her wooden sword tightly, and slowly stood up without making a sound.

“Now!”

She attacked Sigrún from behind. She knew she was just taking out her anger on her, but she didn't care. Given Sigrún valued training that was as close to actual combat as possible, a sneak attack was perfectly fair.

“I'm going to break your neck!”

Hildegard put all her strength behind the blow and brought down her sword —

“Huh?! Guuh!”

Sigrún dodged by rotating her body, as though she had eyes on the back of her head, and landed a side swing into Hildegard’s torso.

“Urrgh...”

“I’ll give you credit for trying to wrest a point from me at all costs. But you don’t have the basics down. First, get your basics right before trying to rely on ruses,” Sigrún said coolly as Hildegard was doubled over in pain, holding her flank. Sigrún showed no sign of being bothered by the sneak attack.

“Sorry to keep you waiting. Come at me.”

She had turned away from Hildegard as though she held no further interest for her and gestured for her next opponent to fight her. It was humiliating. Hildegard had never lost to the men in her hometown—usually defeating them handily—and she had maintained her winning streak even when she was part of Jörgen’s group, easily defeating the supposedly elite members of the Múspell Unit in training matches. Against Sigrún, however, she couldn’t even manage to put up a decent fight. Sigrún dealt with her as easily as she would a toddler. Hildegard’s pride was in tatters. Even as she had tried to break Sigrún’s neck, she had, instead, had her ego shattered. It was pathetic.

“D-Dammit! I’ll make you regret this!” Overwhelmed by anger and embarrassment, Hildegard ran off from the training ground. She felt nothing but rage welling up from within.

“I’ll kill her! Kill her! Kill her dammit!” As though animated by the dark resentment welling up from inside her, Hildegard began swinging her wooden sword inside the woods she had run into. “Die! Die! Die! Diiiiieee!”

She hated everything. It went without saying she despised Sigrún for so easily defeating her, but the pitying glances from those around her had also been utterly humiliating. She also resented the fates for being born in the same era as a monster like Sigrún. But what irritated her the most was her own weakness.

“I’ll get stronger!”

With renewed determination, Hildegard continued swinging her wooden

sword. She did it over and over again. Hildegard was a slacker at heart. In fact, when she had first joined the Múspell Unit, she had pushed her duties onto others and slacked off. If she didn't have to train, she'd be happy just spending every day sleeping.

"I'll win, no matter what!"

She hated losing more than she loved being lazy, however. Her pride wouldn't let her remain a doormat for Sigrún. Why had she let her talent go to her head? Why hadn't she put in the time to train properly? Her anger at herself drove her as she kept moving. She swung, and she swung, and she kept swinging.

"Oh? I thought you'd run back home, but I'm impressed to see otherwise."

Suddenly Hildegard heard the voice she least wanted to hear in the world behind her. When she looked around her, she realized the sun had gone down and it was pitch black. The blisters on her hands had burst. She felt a stinging pain coming from her hands. But what hurt more than anything was her heart.

"What do you want...?" Hildegard asked bluntly, keeping her back to Sigrún. If she didn't try to put up a front, she knew she'd burst into tears of frustration. And the woman behind her was the last person she wanted seeing those tears.

"Oh, I was just taking a walk and saw you. So I thought I'd come to chat," Sigrún replied.

Hildegard bit down, grinding her teeth. Sigrún once again made clear how little she cared about her.

"That said... If I were to offer you some critique, if you just randomly swing a sword like that, you'll never catch up to me," Sigrún explained.

"Wha?!" Hildegard's eyes went wide. She couldn't stay quiet when Sigrún had declared she'd *never* catch up. "Th-There's no way you can know that! I'll train and train and train and someday I'll eaaasily beat you!" Hildegard proclaimed proudly.

"Oh? You've got spirit, I'll grant you that," Sigrún said with a note of admiration. While Hildegard had thought she was mocking her at the time, Sigrún later revealed that she had been impressed by Hildegard and had seen a promising protégé at that moment. According to Sigrún, the fact that Hildegard

hadn't simply given up and accepted never besting her like the others had been a pleasant surprise. It was after this exchange that Sigrún took Hildegard under her wing and paid special attention to her, but at the time, Hildegard found Sigrún to be an irritatingly smug figure.

"Hrmph! Just keep looking down on me. I'll get you eventually." With that remark, Hildegard resumed her practice swings, as though to indicate the conversation was over. It was hardly the attitude to take with someone she had accepted the Chalice from, but she was in no mood to care. If Sigrún wanted to cut off that relationship, then so be it. An Einherjar like Hildegard would have plenty of opportunities for employment. In fact, if it meant she could get away from a smug bitch like Sigrún, she would be happy to leave.

"Hm... Hold on one moment."

The moment Hildegard tried to lift the wooden sword she had swung, Sigrún held it down with the sheath of her sword.

"What?"

"Swing far, far more slowly," Sigrún explained.

"Wha?! But that wouldn't be training!"

"It will. Try it for a year at least."

"Whaaat?! A year?!" Hildegard couldn't help but say with a cry of surprise. It made no sense to her. If she did that for a whole year, she was sure her muscles would wither away.

"Mother Sigrún. Are you sure you're not lying to me to protect your title of Mánagarmr?"

Sigrún snorted in laughter. While she had become more expressive in the last few months, back then it was rare to see any sign of emotion from her. "Don't nitpick and just try it. It's what Brother Ská made me do, and I make the other Múspells do the same thing," Sigrún said.

"Huh..." Hildegard fell quietly into thought. It would be easy enough to ask around and check if Sigrún was telling the truth. While she hadn't known Sigrún long, Hildegard knew right away that Sigrún was honest to a fault—she

wouldn't tell such an obvious lie. "Why slowly though?" she asked.

"That's for you to notice on your own," Sigrún replied.

"Say what?!" Hildegard had to restrain herself from lashing out. She knew Sigrún would easily put her down, but her irritation kept building. To tell her what to do but not explain why—surely she was joking...

"Think about it with that clever little head of yours. If you spend the next year giving it some real consideration, you might be able to take a point from me," Sigrún said smugly.

"Wow... It's already been a year, huh? Time sure flies," Hildegard murmured softly to herself.

Indeed, only a bit over a year had gone by since those events, but it felt like much more time had passed in her mind, likely because the year had been particularly intense for her. In all that time, Hildegard had yet to score a proper point against Sigrún. She had done so a few times in practice, but she had yet to manage it when Sigrún was fighting at full strength. Still, she felt she was now able to put up a decent fight against her.

"Stop playing around, she says..." Hildegard repeated the words her mentor had shouted at her a moment ago. Having spent nearly every day over the last year training with Hildegard, Sigrún knew better than anyone just how capable the girl was. Sigrún wasn't one to lie either. She truly believed that a focused Hildegard would be able to take on the Five Blades of the Flame Clan—that she should easily win any duel. Hildegard felt a warmth flutter in her chest.

"Well, if she's willing to go that far, I can't let her down." Hildegard slowly returned to her fighting stance. She relaxed her shoulders and loosened her grip on her spear. Her spear point lashed out as a blur and crossed spears with Ryusai.

"Whoa there! That was close. You almost did me in!" Ryusai's features paled, the cockiness he'd been displaying a moment earlier all but gone. It was too early for him to relax, however.

"Raaaah!"

Hildegard let out a powerful shout and followed up with a series of rapid spear thrusts.

“G-Grrr!”

Ryusai quickly wound up entirely on the defensive. At first glance, this situation was no different from the start of their battle, but upon closer observation, it was clear that his expression had completely changed. His previous cockiness was nowhere to be seen, and his brow was furrowed in concentration.

“H-How did you suddenly...?! This is completely different from earlier!” a bewildered Ryusai yelled out.

“I just remembered who I usually am,” Hildegard replied with an unusually calm demeanor about her. Hildegard’s anger created unnecessary tension that often caused her to overswing her blows, an act that blunted the effectiveness of her attacks and practically told her opponent she was about to attack. Now that she had regained her composure, however, she had removed any signs of tension from her stance and was once again focusing on the basics of making the most effective motions for her attacks.

“Ryusai, was it? You’re definitely strong. But you’re not even fit to lick Mother Rún’s boots.”

She wasn’t taunting him. It was her honest appraisal after exchanging blows with him. Even if she had yet to win a duel with Sigrún, she still managed to put up a good fight against her, meaning she was but a hair’s breadth short of Sigrún in terms of skill. Now that Hildegard was able to make use of her skills, there was no way she was going to lose to an inferior fighter like Ryusai.

“Guh!”

Hildegard’s spear finally caught Ryusai, splitting his cheek. In that instant, Ryusai let out a feral shout and loosed his spear at Hildegard’s chest. Unfortunately for him, his blow appeared as though it was moving in slow motion to Hildegard. She easily brushed it aside.

“Hey now. I thought you didn’t want to kill girls, no?” she quipped at him.

“Sure, I don’t *want* to. But if I have no other choice, I’ll do it. I’ll kill a girl,”

Ryusai said with a deadly serious expression. His playfulness had been wiped off his features. Hildegard couldn't hold back a dry laugh at his response. Not at his change, but herself.

"Sheesh. To think I let a small fry that goes back on his word get to me so easily," Hildegard said teasingly.

"Shut up!" Ryusai shrieked as he unleashed a flurry of blows against Hildegard. It was a storm of spear thrusts, but Hildegard handily deflected every one of them. Certainly, the attacks were fast and strong, but they were totally unrefined—they relied entirely on Ryusai's innate talent. Each of the blows had buckets of wasted effort behind them.

"You swing far too slow!" Hildegard teased. She swiftly exploited a momentary delay between Ryusai's strike and switched to the offensive—an act Sigrún often leveraged against Hildegard in their training matches. She had pointed it out to Hildegard as a common cause of her losses. Each time she lost, Hildegard had done as Sigrún had instructed: practiced slow, relaxed swings with her wooden sword. Although at first she had thought it a bother and couldn't understand the reasoning behind the action, as she sought the deeper meaning behind it, she slowly came to understand why it was necessary.

It was simple: powerful, full-strength swings merely provided the illusion of improvement—they weren't actually helping her learn anything. The things she couldn't notice when she was swinging quickly were obvious when she slowed down. There was no way to ignore the flaws in her own technique. After she came to this realization, Hildegard had carefully thought through each swing, trying new variations to come up with a better form. She had spent over a year doing exactly that. Eventually, she realized that instead of simply relying on instinct, she was now constantly thinking about the logic behind her movements—questioning the whys and hows of every last action. Even in her practice duels with Sigrún, she carefully observed her mentor's movements and worked to incorporate the techniques that had impressed her.

It wasn't that she hadn't been using her head while fighting. However, there was a clear difference now. Until this point, she had just been vaguely thinking during her battles. Because of that, she had been completely oblivious of the things that had gone on around her. Despite her best intentions, she had

essentially stopped thinking when she fought.

“Hah. So this is what I looked like back then...”

She began to understand as she exchanged blows with Ryusai. She saw her past self in his motions—the very same girl that had relied entirely on her instincts and physical abilities. Oh, how defenseless and raw she once had been!

Hildegard began deftly exploiting Ryusai’s various small flaws—each of which were ones that Sigrún had once pointed out in Hildegard herself. She knew exactly what she needed to do to break him down. It had been thoroughly drilled into her.

“Heh, there’s so little of you in your technique,” Hildegard remarked as they continued to exchange blows. Ryusai’s attacks weren’t taking advantage of his well-built physique. He was tied down by his preconceptions as to how he was supposed to use his spear—he couldn’t find it in him to question them.

Every person had a unique body the gods had given them. There were fighting techniques that were best suited for that individual’s physique. Ryusai had clearly not explored what was best suited to him. There was no way for him to refine his skills to unlock his full potential. Hildegard took advantage of the vulnerabilities that his lack of refinement left open, and she was gradually pushing him toward defeat as a result.

“Guh!”

Then, as though she were following a series of steps, her spear pierced Ryusai’s chest. It was clearly a mortal wound. Ryusai’s body wobbled and fell from his horse.

“Yes! I got him, Mother Rún!” Hildegard yelled with great pride. This was Hildegard’s first notable kill. She turned to her mentor with a bright smile spread across her face.

“...What?!”

As she looked over at Sigrún, she witnessed something she never thought she would see. It was unbelievable. It shouldn’t have been possible. There was no way a warrior as great as Sigrún should be taking a blow from an enemy spear

and falling from her horse!

The moment Homura vanished, Thír quickly turned her head to her right. She had lost sight of Homura—her superhuman burst of speed coming completely by surprise—but she had been able to read her movements to some extent because Homura had telegraphed it. Of course, it had only been possible for Thír to do so thanks to her extensive combat experience.

“Huh?! Oh...” Seemingly out of nowhere, blood sprayed from the chest of Kólga, one of the Maidens of the Waves. She had been stabbed by Homura’s dagger. The sheer speed had caught her off guard, and her mind had yet to process what had happened as she stared down at the spraying blood with a look of shock.

“K-Kólga?!” Thír instinctively called her name.

“M-Mother...” Kólga reached out to her mentor with a trembling hand before she fell forward. Her body lay still, all surrounding motion ceasing except the slowly spreading pool of blood.

“You...!” Thír glared daggers at Homura, her steely eyes narrowed in hatred. The other Maidens of the Waves also bristled with anger. They had grown up with the two slain maidens—raised as sisters. They were practically family.

“O, this feeling... I wanted to experience this again,” Homura said, smiling as she absorbed the hatred in the looks from her opponents. She immediately furrowed her brow in annoyance, however. “Hmm... It’s not *quite* the same though. His was a lot sharper and blacker. A lot scarier, really.”

She began to talk about an opponent who wasn’t present. Thír gripped her hand tightly into a fist, trembling with rage. Thír had spent her life raising the Maidens of the Waves. They were her beloved daughters—her pride and joy. Despite that, this young girl was treating them with utter contempt. There was no way Thír could forgive an insult of that magnitude. However, the only thing that awaited her if she recklessly charged at Homura was a fate much the same as the other two.

“Maidens! Hold your positions! She’s faster than Erna!” Thír warned the remaining three Maidens of the Waves. Erna was a leg-strength-specialized

Einherjar, and she was by far the fastest of the Maidens of the Waves. Despite being used to sparring with Erna in their training sessions, they hadn't been able to react to Homura's movements. While even Thír herself found her own words hard to believe, there was no denying what she was seeing before her.

"Knees and shoulders!" Thír barked. Upon hearing this, the trio of Maidens nodded in understanding.

Homura, on the other hand, appeared puzzled. "Knees? Shoulders?" she parroted in confusion. It seemed she hadn't quite understood what Thír was trying to say. She couldn't help but look down at her own knees, turning her gaze away from Thír and the others. Noticing this, Thír immediately made eye contact with the others and the four of them charged in unison. In the end, Homura was just a child—she clearly hadn't learned the dangers of taking her eye off her enemies in battle. As someone who had raised countless apprentices herself, Thír felt a pang of guilt at attacking a young child, but now wasn't the time for such qualms. The creature in front of the remaining Maidens was deadlier than a garmr. The only choice they had was either to kill her now or die themselves.

"Oopsie..."

Unfortunately for the Maidens, all four of their attacks cut through empty space. Having noticed their impending attack in the nick of time, Homura had leaped safely away from them. Homura kicked off the ground the moment she landed and darted toward them once more at a speed rivaling a bullet from an arquebus. Thír's sword and Homura's dagger crossed paths, and the sharp clang of metal on metal rang through the air.

"Oh?" Homura's eyes widened in surprise. It seemed it hadn't even occurred to her that Thír would block the attack.

"Don't underestimate me!" Thír deflected Homura's dagger and slashed downward. Homura had already vanished, and Thír glanced sharply to her left. There she was, much as Thír had expected. Her dagger was locked against Dúfa's own weapon.

"Huh, you too?" Homura sounded impressed. A heartbeat later, another maiden who looked identical to Dúfa attacked from Homura's rear. The attack

had come from Homura's blind spot, but she easily blocked the blow by bringing her dagger around to protect her back. Dúfa followed up on that attack, and soon Homura was exchanging blows with the pair. Dúfa and Læva were twins, and their specialty was their perfectly synchronized coordination. It was no exaggeration to say that they were probably superior to the powerful combination of Erna and Hrönn.

"Wow, you two are good!" However, Homura breezily dealt with the rush of blows that they unleashed against her. In fact, matters only took a turn for the worse...

"Grah!"

"No...!"

The odds quickly moved in Homura's favor, and she began to overwhelm the two Maidens. There was simply too wide of a gap in strength and speed between the two parties. Each time they exchanged blows, the taller Dúfa and Læva were the ones thrown backward, an eerily unnatural sight.

"Tch!"

Thír knew it was only a matter of time before Homura killed them. She intervened with a thrusting lunge. As the instructor to the Maidens of the Waves, Thír was known for having a large number of advanced combat techniques at her disposal, but this particular lunge was her specialty—the trump card she reserved for emergencies.

"Yipes!"

Even Homura let out a note of surprise at the attack. The timing was perfect: it was impossible to avoid, and there was nowhere for Homura to run. Thír was certain she had her, but Homura leaped high into the air to avoid the blow at the last moment. The girl had used her supernaturally strong legs to leap higher than the height of a grown adult. It was proof of how ruthlessly powerful a twin-runed Einherjar was.

"Hev!"

But that, too, was well within Thír's expectations. After all, their fellow Maiden of the Waves, Erna, was capable of the same feat. Hearing Thír's call,

Hev, the last Maiden, swept her axe with a roar. There was no way for Homura to dodge it as she was suspended in midair. The twin-runed girl somehow still managed to block the blow with her dagger, but she was tossed backward toward the ground. Hev was the largest of the Maidens of the Waves and had the strength to match her size.

Though Homura had been thrown to the ground, she managed to flip her body around before impact, ultimately landing without incident. She had the dexterity of an ape. “You ladies are really good! You can actually follow my movements!” Homura smiled happily as though nothing had happened. It might have seemed she was impressed, but her tone was that of an adult praising a child. She was clearly simply stating that they weren’t bad for mere single-runed Einherjar.

“Your physical abilities are remarkable. But your movements are those of an amateur,” Thír dropped back into her stance and said with a dismissive snort. By watching Homura’s shoulders and knees, it was possible to read her movements. So long as they knew when she planned to strike, warriors of Thír’s skill could react with little difficulty—no matter how fast her attacks were.

“Oh, I see. Okay. I get it now,” Homura said aloud in some apparent gesture of understanding. As she spoke, the tension visibly drained from her limbs. The moment Thír narrowed her eyes warily, Homura disappeared from view. Almost instantaneously, a grunt of pain could be heard nearby.

“Guh!”

When Thír turned to face the source of the sound, she saw Hev’s flank split open by Homura’s blade, blood spraying from the gash. To Thír’s chagrin, however, the slaughter had only just started. Homura vanished a second time.

“Ahhh!”

“Urgh!”

By the time Thír had reacted to the screams of pain, Dúfa and Læva had collapsed, sinking into pools of their own blood.

“How?! N-No... She couldn’t have adapted this quickly!” Thír murmured in shocked disbelief. Tells weren’t that easy to correct. Thír, as a fighting

instructor, knew that better than anyone.

“Well, I had good examples to learn from,” Homura responded smugly.

“Tch! You mimicked our techniques, huh?!” Thír replied angrily, teeth chattering from the shock that ran up her spine. The Maidens of the Waves, under Thír’s guidance, had mastered the art of using their center of gravity to conceal any movement in their knees before an attack. They also concealed any tells from their shoulders by skillfully making use of the opposite arm. However, these were skills they had acquired after years of training.

“Thanks. You helped me get stronger. This’ll let me beat *him* too.”

With that, Homura vanished once again. Thír felt a sharp pain stab through her chest the next moment. When she glanced down, she saw a dagger sticking out of her chest near her heart.

“Not...like...this...”

Sputtering out what little speech she could still manage, Thír coughed up a pool of blood and fell backward. She saw the faces of her apprentices, the Maidens of the Waves, and Fagrahvél, her patriarch. She couldn’t die yet. At the very least, she wanted to take the killer of her beloved daughters to the underworld with her, but her body wouldn’t respond. Her consciousness soon slipped away.

“Hmm... This is pretty hard. I guess I can’t do it as well as they did...”

Those were the last words Thír ever heard. The monster was still evolving.

“I-I bring dire news, Your Majesty! Th-They’ve been wiped out!”

“What?!”

Yuuto’s expression stiffened at the news coming over his radio. Currently, his forces had been, at worst, stalemated against the enemy on all fronts. It should have been impossible for any unit to be wiped out.

“Lady Thír and the rest of the Maidens of the Waves on the left flank have all been slain!”

“What?! How?!”

Even Yuuto couldn't believe his ears. The Maidens of the Waves were the Sword Clan's elite Einherjar. He had assigned six of them to the left flank. It would take a twin-runed monster like Steinþórr—

"...Was it Homura?" Yuuto asked warily.

"Yes. It happened in the blink of an eye," the voice on the radio replied.

"I...see."

That was the most Yuuto could muster. While the Maidens of the Waves had only joined the Steel Clan relatively recently, he still knew all of their faces and names. They were precious companions to Fagrahvél and Bára, now two of his most trusted advisors, and he had also heard they had been friends with Sigrún and Hildegard. Of course, this was war—he had been prepared for the death of his acquaintances. Even so, he was only human. It wasn't a simple matter to process when it happened, and he felt a dull throb in his chest.

"The left flank has collapsed after losing their commanders. The troops have scattered and are fleeing the field," the report from the radio continued.

However, reality wasn't going to give him time to process the news. This had broken the stalemate to the Steel Clan's disadvantage.

"A cheer from the enemy right flank! They're claiming they've slain Sigrún!"

"Wha?!"

An even more shocking bit of news came as a follow-up blow. There was no way that could possibly be true, even with her existing injuries. Yuuto felt the blood drain from his face and his body began to tremble. Unfortunately for him, bad news often came in waves.

"...Huh?"

He suddenly felt the strength drain from his body. He also felt a sudden lethargy. At first, he'd thought it was due to the sheer shock of the news he'd received, but the same thing had happened to his royal guard. That must mean...

"Gjallarhorn's run out..." Yuuto bit down on his lower lip and sighed. Its effects had fallen off much quicker than he had expected. Thinking back, they

had used Gjallarhorn repeatedly over the last several days. It was easy to imagine that he had simply pushed Fagrahvél past her limit. Alternatively, the deaths of the Maidens of the Waves might have delivered too much of a shock to Fagrahvél. Either way, this seiðr had been the lifeline the Steel Clan Army had been clinging to. It was only because they had this “Rune of Kings” that they were able to fight an army three times their size. With that gone, it took little time for the Steel Clan Army’s ranks to completely collapse.

ACT 4

“Their witchcraft has finally come to an end, it would seem, and not a moment too soon...”

Nobunaga let out a slow breath.

To the Steel Clan’s scouts, the Flame Clan was an impenetrable iron wall—a force that effortlessly brushed aside their assaults. The reality, however, was quite different. The scales had threatened to tip against the Flame Clan at several points during the conflict, and it had required total concentration from Nobunaga to keep his forces together.

“To find myself so shaken after something as minor as this... My age has caught up with me.” Nobunaga said derisively, chuckling self-deprecatingly as his knees trembled—the aged patriarch struggling to remain upright. The relief from having withstood the Steel Clan’s assault had drained the tension from him, leaving exhaustion in its wake. Fatigue gripped his mind, and his limbs felt like lead.

“My Great Lord, it may be too early to relax. This could very well be a trap to get us to let down our guard,” Old Man Salk, serving as his adjutant, said as a warning. The art of drawing the enemy into a false sense of security at an apparent victory was a tactic as old as warfare itself. Salk’s caution was understandable, however...

“No, there’s no chance of that,” Nobunaga declared simply. If Gjallarhorn could be activated and deactivated that easily, they would have used it much more proactively in battles past. The fact that they had never employed it in that fashion meant that it required a certain degree of preparation. That said, it was still a small price relative to the sheer power of the rune itself.

“More than anything, I can feel the fear from the Steel Clan soldiers. The troops don’t lie,” Nobunaga added smugly, his lips curling into a feral grin. A general in his position needed to chomp down on every morsel of information he could gather from the battlefield. The snippets of voices he heard from in

front of him were clearly frightened—and the number was significant. He no longer felt the sting of the enemy's determined gaze either. There was no way this was a feint.

“We’ve slain the Mánagarmr!”

“We’ve avenged Lord Shiba and Lord Vassarfall!”

“The Steel Clan is finished!”

The cheers of Flame Clan soldiers echoed from the battlefield's left flank. That settled it. The death of the Steel Clan's talismanic warrior, the Mánagarmr, who had slain two of the Flame Clan's Five Division Commanders, had just been announced. It was the kind of news that would shatter enemy morale while providing an enormous boost to their own. Nobunaga smacked his knees to steady them and stood to issue his proclamation.

“The time has come! Send word to all units! Pursue the enemy and wipe them out!” Nobunaga yelled with thunderous vigor.

“So that's it, huh...”

Yuuto let out a long breath, as though exhaling everything that had been pent up inside him until that moment. After having the scales tipped so far in his opponent's favor, he wasn't sure what he could do to change things. He'd long since run out of trump cards and party tricks to use against the Flame Clan. This battle had been decided.

“We're withdrawing to Valaskjálf Palace!” Yuuto ordered. There wasn't the slightest hint of hesitation in his tone. While a general's greatest responsibility was to win the battle, the second most important was to know when they were defeated and do everything they can to minimize their losses.

Thanks, perhaps, to the efforts of Thír and the others, there was still a good deal of distance between the Steel Clan forces and the western and eastern flanks of the Flame Clan Army. While the main body under Nobunaga's direct command had quickly switched to offense, the soldiers themselves were still in the process of reorganizing for a pursuit and were a touch slower than expected. They were probably still dealing with the psychological impact of

fighting Gjallarhorn-boosted Steel Clan soldiers. Of course, that wouldn't last long—the moment they realized they no longer had to worry about fighting those fearless berserkers, they were going to attack with a vengeance. At this juncture, the briefest hesitation on Yuuto's end would vastly increase the Steel Clan Army's losses.

Only the most foolish generals would waste soldiers on futile last stands driven by vanity and spiritualism. Even the greatest general wasn't going to win every battle, after all. The wise man was quick to change. Yuuto's ability to switch his mindset so fluidly was another reason he made such an excellent general.

"...Brother Rungr, can I leave the rear guard to you?" Yuuto designated his masked brother with a pained expression. Frankly, it was nearly unbearable for him to ask someone close to him to take on this dangerous task, but there was no one better suited to the role. The tactic that Hveðrungr had developed—using the suicide squads left to him by Skáviðr in self-sacrificial attacks on the enemy—was the most effective strategy to use under these circumstances. Whatever his personal feelings, as a general, this was the decision Yuuto had to make.

"Your Majesty, aren't you relying a bit too much on myself of late?" Hveðrungr replied with a touch of venom, adding a sigh for emphasis. He was right. Not only that, but almost all of his assignments had been extremely difficult ones. Yuuto could only shrug with a dry laugh.

"Can't help it. I can't seem to find anyone better suited for it than you," Yuuto replied.

"I suppose I'll accept that line of reasoning." With a soft snort, Hveðrungr turned on his heel, his cloak fluttering as he moved. He then called to Yuuto without looking back. "Get out of here. I'll at least buy you time for that."

"Brother..."

"Don't get the wrong idea. I'm doing it for Felicia's sake," Hveðrungr said dismissively. But to Yuuto, it sounded like he was just trying to hide his true feelings.

"Yeah, I know. Thanks, Big Brother! Don't die out there!" Felicia yelled out to

him.

“May the gods protect you, Brother!” Yuuto added.

With those words, the chariot rattled away. Hveðrungr sighed without turning around to watch them leave. “Fools. You’re my elders with the Chalice now.”

The moment they let their guard down in the slightest, the two of them always reverted to how they had addressed him in the past. It made no difference no matter how many times Hveðrungr pointed it out. Perhaps they simply weren’t taking their roles as the þjóðann of a great empire and one of his closest retainers seriously enough. Tsk... His younger brother and sister still had a lot to learn.

“An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, I suppose,” Hveðrungr chuckled as he spread out a map of Glaðsheimr with countless Xs scattered around it. He had already positioned his suicide squads near the Valaskjálf Palace before the battle had started, and they were already in place to handle the enemy’s advance. There was no need for any last-minute preparations on his part. “That said, it would have been best if things hadn’t needed to come to this...”

It wasn’t as though Hveðrungr had been expecting Yuuto to ask this of him from the start. No, it was simply that they were up against Oda Nobunaga. He knew there was no such thing as overpreparing against an opponent of his caliber.

“Sure, but shouldn’t we be getting ourselves a bit farther out of the way?” the alluring beauty standing next to him asked flippantly. Her name was Sigyn. She had once been patriarch of the Panther Clan, but she was now Hveðrungr’s wife.

“I would like nothing more than to do that...” Hveðrungr then let out a long sigh. He was currently standing on the roof of a house that had somehow remained intact. It had a good view of the approaching army, and it was well-suited to providing orders to the soldiers below. However, it was also very conspicuous, and given that their army was currently retreating, it was a dangerous place to be.

“However, this is the only way I can think of to make sure the plan succeeds,” he added after a pause.

In the recent retreat from Gjallarbrú Fortress, the enemy had already encountered his suicide squads and had even found a counter to them. It was clear that using the exact same tactic would fail miserably. His only solution to the problem was to stay and wait in the most dangerous part of the city.

“Ah, gotcha. So that creepy thing down there is also part of your plan? I mean, I can see what you’re going for, but is it someone that you need to go to such crazy lengths to defeat?” Sigyn inquired.

“Yeah, she’s up there with Steinþórr,” Hveðrungr replied.

“That bad?! Are you sure you can handle her?!” Sigyn asked worriedly.

“No idea,” Hveðrungr replied flatly.

“You’re an odd one, you know. I can’t imagine you have any reason to be that loyal to Suoh Yuuto,” Sigyn stated in exasperation.

“That makes you just as odd, doesn’t it? Why are you still here with me?” Hveðrungr quipped. Their marriage had originally been a political one. Hveðrungr had needed to cement a power base in a clan where he was a foreigner, while Sigyn had felt she was barely holding together her rabble of rogues. Given that the Panther Clan had been absorbed into the Steel Clan and Hveðrungr held no power, there was no reason for her to stay with him.

“Hah! You know, despite all appearances, I’m a loyal and loving woman. Not that you’ve seemed to notice yet.”

“Believe it or not, those qualities were why I asked for you. I figured you’d stay with me in the end.”

“You really are a piece of work, you know...”

“A common compliment,” Hveðrungr remarked dryly. He always did stick to his principles in the end—simply making use of whatever and whoever he could to achieve his goals.

“I guess this is what love does to you, huh? So, what do you need me to do?” Sigyn asked him.

“Well, to start with... Cast Fimbulvetr on me when the moment’s right,” Hveðrungr replied.

“Huh? Why would you...”

“Looks like there’s no time to explain.”

Hveðrungr shoved Sigyn by the shoulder, throwing her off the roof. Of course, Sigyn was an Einherjar—the fall wouldn’t be a problem. No, the bigger issue was the sharp sound of metal clashing against metal that rang through the air.

“Grrr! You took a lot of finding, Hvesomething!” Homura shouted in her high-pitched, childish voice as the two exchanged blows.

If Hveðrungr was honest, hers was a voice he’d hoped he’d never hear again. But, if he left her out in the streets, his suicide squads wouldn’t stand a chance of completing their mission. Her overwhelmingly potent ability to detect living creatures would allow her to quickly uncover all of their ambush points. Hveðrungr had decided to use that power against her. If he stood in a conspicuous location and used himself as bait, he figured that she would be drawn to him. That had gone exactly to plan. He still had one problem to solve, however...

“I’m gonna have to figure out how to survive this...” he thought to himself.

Twin-runed Einherjar broke all of the rules. Homura was possibly the worst opponent for someone like Hveðrungr—a man who depended on manipulating and exploiting the rules of human nature to win.

“Tch. They’re making use of the suicide squads again. How unoriginal...” Nobunaga furrowed his brow and sighed with frustration. Just as he had won the clash of the main armies and was about to use the momentum from it to push his advantage, the suicide bombers of the Steel Clan’s rear guard had once again stopped him in his tracks. His foul mood was understandable. That said, he had already overcome this tactic once before.

“Send Homura at once,” Nobunaga relayed to one of his messengers. The enemy’s suicide bombers relied upon the fact that a handful of soldiers were scattered around in hiding, but Homura was able to detect the presence of any

living creature. If he sent her in to identify their ambush locations, it would kneecap their entire strategy, or so he had hoped...

"I-I bring a message. Her Highness suddenly left the front lines and is currently unaccounted for," a returning scout informed Nobunaga.

"What?! What in the blazes is going on?!" Nobunaga shouted angrily, his brow twitching with rage. While they had won the melee, that was only a tactical victory. The biggest results were often achieved during the pursuit phase of the battle, and though the Steel Clan had lost, they hadn't lost many units. The only way to truly claim victory over the Steel Clan here would be to chase down their retreating forces and cut them down before they managed to regroup. Her sudden absence at this juncture was inexcusable in his eyes, despite his affection for his daughter.

"A-According to witnesses, she shouted 'Found him' before she ran off..."

"So *that's* what it's about, huh..." Nobunaga murmured as things clicked into place in his mind, though he still let out an exasperated sigh. The masked man who had defeated Homura had also been the one commanding the suicide squads during their previous encounter. He was probably doing the same this time as well. Though it was nothing more than an assumption, Nobunaga had figured out that Homura had detected him and hadn't been able to restrain herself. She was, after all, still just a child.

"You know what Her Highness found?" the messenger asked.

"Yes, she's probably gone to confront her past," Nobunaga replied.

"Pardon? Her past?" Nobunaga's comment appeared to have made little sense to the messenger, who simply blinked in confusion.

In Nobunaga's eyes, there was no need for him to explain things to a mere messenger. He simply responded, "We'll ignore Homura's absence. I'll give her a proper lecture afterward, of course."

Nobunaga always had a soft spot for his family. Homura had gone to face down an opponent who had utterly dominated her in battle and taught her the true meaning of fear. He would be lying if he said he had no concerns about her ability to defeat the masked man, but he bit down on that anxiety. To Homura,

the masked man was the first obstacle she had ever encountered in life. She needed to overcome that obstacle on her own. If she didn't, she had no right to be his heir. That was Nobunaga's way of preparing his child for kingship. He had no intention of sparing the rod and spoiling his daughter.

"We'll lose our opportunity if we wait for her to return. We'll continue our advance," Nobunaga explained.

"I may not have seen this tactic of theirs with my own eyes, but is that not a risky gamble? We may end up losing quite a few capable officers in the process," Old Man Salk warned him with a frown.

Nobunaga understood his point. The enemy's suicide squads focused their attacks upon higher-ranking officers. It was easy to replace common soldiers, but capable officers were another thing entirely. There was a limited pool of people with the necessary talent, which alone wasn't enough to make them useful. They needed to be properly schooled and trained in the art of war. Those things took time, money, and sacrifice. Losing all of those investments would be a painful loss for the future of the Flame Clan.

"I know the risk. But fortune only favors the bold!" Nobunaga stated proudly to reassure his nervous subordinates. He had no intention of underestimating Suoh Yuuto in the slightest. If Nobunaga was a conqueror like Xiang Yu, then Yuuto was a ruler who had the virtues of a king like Liu Bang. While those virtues might also make him more merciful than required, it was also capable of inspiring almost fanatical loyalty in his subjects. If Nobunaga failed to follow up here and gave him time to recover, there was a high probability Yuuto would use his charisma to quickly rebuild his army. To allow him to escape for fear of losing officers would simply mean that the Flame Clan would end up losing even more officers fighting a newly energized Steel Clan. There were times when a general needed to accept great sacrifices to prevent even greater losses. Now was one of those times.

"All forces, charge in! We'll crush them with brute force!"

Hveðrungr felt the torrent of ásmegin sting at his skin. His mouth was dry from the tension. In front of him was a monster in the shape of a human child.

Hveðrungr swallowed before he spoke. “Hm? Who in the hell are you?” He tilted his head and looked quizzically in her direction. It was, of course, an act. There was no way he could forget such a monstrously powerful enemy, even if he had wanted to.

“What?! Are you saying you don’t remember me?! I’m Homura!” the small girl yelled angrily.

“Homura? Ah yes! That’s right! You’re the girl who wet herself from fear,” Hveðrungr responded mockingly.

“I-I didn’t w-wet myself!” she protested furiously, her cheeks beet red. As immensely powerful as she was, she was still just a young girl. She was comically easy to taunt. She was so strong, in fact, that Hveðrungr, one of the three greatest individual warriors in the Steel Clan, was forced to resort to such petty tactics from the outset.

“I’m mad now! I’m not gonna forgive you! I’m going to make you cry!” Homura exclaimed.

“I see... But now’s your chance to run. I’m not letting you get away with just wetting yourself this time, shrimp,” Hveðrungr, continuing his taunts, rebutted.

“I said I didn’t wet myself!”

“Is that true? I’m pretty sure you were trembling and bawling your eyes out.”

“Grrr! I’m going to kill you!” With a shrill shout of rage, Homura vanished from view. Hveðrungr immediately glanced skyward. As he expected, she was right where he’d set his gaze and ready to strike with her dagger. She was extraordinarily fast. In fact, if he had never seen her move before, she might have killed him before he registered that anything had happened. A moment later, the sound of metal clashing against metal rang through the air.

“Is that all you’ve got? You won’t be able to kill me with that.” Hveðrungr blocked her blow with his blade and chuckled with a smirk. He had already learned her movements in their previous encounter. Her anger made her all the easier to read. Deflecting her attacks was a simple matter.

“I’m not done yet!” she replied.

“Ah?”

Even after he stopped her attack in its tracks, Homura shoved forward, using her greater strength to her advantage. Despite the fact that the girl in front of him was less than half his weight, he felt like he was grappling with a giant predator. Little did she know, however, that this was exactly the situation Hveðrungr wanted to find himself in.

A slight smirk appeared on Hveðrungr’s face. “Heh...”

“Wha?!”

Homura’s dagger slipped along Hveðrungr’s blade. It was the Willow Technique that he had learned from his master, Skáviðr. The stronger the enemy, the more effective it was. Homura, seemingly unprepared for its use, lost her footing. Or so Hveðrungr had thought...

“Nope!” she yelled mockingly.

“What?! Guh!”

Just as her feet had started falling from under her, Homura leaned forward, using her momentum to slam her heel into Hveðrungr’s face.

“Gah!” Hveðrungr was thrown backward from the blow. The impact on his body knocked the wind out of him for a moment.

“Ugh...”

He tried to force himself to stand, but he felt his vision waver, and he was left unsteady on his feet. He had taken a full spinning kick from a twin-runed Einherjar. The blow had taken its toll. Thankfully, he had somehow managed to roll with the kick to dampen most of its power. Had he not done so, the kick might even have knocked him out cold.

“...Thibt!”

He felt a hard object in his mouth and he spat it out. White fragments were mixed with the blood as it landed on the ground. The kick had shattered one of his molars, and he had just spit out the pieces.

“I’ve seen you do that before. It won’t work on Homura again. Also, neither will that tongue of yours,” The girl stated, smiling coolly as she looked down at

Hveðrungr. There was no trace of anger in her eyes, nor was there any excitement or joy from landing that blow in her expression. She was calm as she gazed down at him.

“...So that was all an act,” he replied.

“That’s right.”

“Tch. Perhaps I’m growing too old for this.”

His attempt at taunting her had appeared to have backfired. It was a painful mistake for a trickster like himself. But what was even more alarming was Homura’s growth—she had calmly analyzed his fighting style and found an effective counter. No doubt she had recalled their previous encounter in her mind countless times to remember how he fought. To someone like her, who had always looked down on others, that must have been a humiliating and painful experience. Her ability to overcome her pride and reflect on her moment of vulnerability alarmed Hveðrungr. People who had faced serious setbacks and bounced back from them often showed immense psychological growth. Homura had learned to do whatever it takes to win, and she no longer underestimated her enemy. That was the most frightening thing of all.

“It seems I slapped the sleeping giant awake.” Hveðrungr couldn’t contain a dry laugh. In terms of pure physical ability, Steinþórr, similarly blessed with twin runes, was still probably superior to Homura in her present state. But Steinþórr had always been too reliant on his innate talent.

Homura’s mindset being very similar to Steinþórr’s during their first encounter had given Hveðrungr a weakness he could exploit. That opening was now long gone, however.

Suddenly, his wife’s voice rang out, and he felt a surge of strength.

“Fimbulvetr!”

Fimbulvetr was a seiðr that Sigyn was particularly adept at wielding, and it removed all constraints on an object. Ordinarily, it was used to remove things like curses, but it could also be used to unlock one’s latent physical ability and draw out their hidden potential, similar to Gjallarhorn. While it wasn’t nearly as powerful as the Rune of Kings, right now it would have to do. The sheer gap in

physical ability between Hveðrungr and Homura was far too great without it. Heck, even with that enhancement, there would still be some ground to cover...

“Yes, this is hardly one of my smartest decisions, is it...” Hveðrungr said with a belated sigh of regret. Hveðrungr was a masterful tactician—a general with a sharp eye and creativity that allowed him, as Panther Clan patriarch, to counter Yuuto’s weapons and tactics, despite their origins from thousands of years in the future. Even among the Steel Clan’s roster of talented generals, he stood a head above the fray. Despite his great strategic skill, however, finding a path to victory in his current situation was proving much too difficult for him.

Hveðrungr desperately blocked the storm of blows that Homura unleashed at him. She was fast—lightning fast. There was no trace of the raw, childish fighting from their previous encounter. And that wasn’t because she had suddenly gained new physical abilities. Even twin-runed Einherjar weren’t able to simply massively increase their physical abilities in a matter of days. No, what had changed was her fighting style. She was no longer a child playing with her prey, and she had streamlined her movements. Just that simple change had turned a monster into a behemoth.

“Tch!”

He felt a sharp pain at the base of his neck. She had only grazed him, and the wound wouldn’t hinder his ability to fight, but if he had been even a fraction of a second slower in avoiding the attack, she would have lopped his head clean off his shoulders.

“If I didn’t already have experience facing her, I’d probably be dead right now...”

While her movements had been streamlined, she hadn’t gotten rid of all of her tells. He had only been able to respond quickly enough because he had seen the attack coming ahead of time.

“Thinking about it, I’m probably the reason she’s had this massive personal growth, aren’t I?”

He regretted taking on the role of rear guard during the Gjallarbrú retreat. That decision had put him squarely in the crosshairs of this monster. He couldn’t help but feel that the fates had completely abandoned him. In fact,

even the relatively agnostic Hveðrungr started to wonder if the gods truly were out to get him.

“Well, I’m sure it’ll be fine...”

Hveðrungr smiled confidently. He’d dealt with worse situations in the past. He’d faced unfairly powerful opponents and come out of it alive. The gods? The fates? None of it made any difference. He would simply overcome this challenge, same as he had always done.

“Wow, good job dodging that one. Though, I guess that’s the very least you could do,” Homura said as she moved her dagger to her opposite hand. She sounded thoroughly arrogant, talking down to him from far above. Yet despite that tone, there was no overconfidence, and certainly no opening for him to exploit. It was simply an expression of her knowledge that she was a more powerful life form.

“Big words from a brat who was bawling after losing to me. Know your place, whelp,” Hveðrungr irritably spat at her. He was betting on the fact that she had been so sensitive to being called a brat in the past, but...

“That’s true. You’re right.” It seemed it didn’t bother her in the least, and she simply nodded in agreement. A very anticlimactic reaction, to be sure. “I didn’t think I’d been looking down on you, but it seems like I was doing it without meaning to. You beat me before, so I’ll just have to take you more seriously.” No, she humbly accepted his words and warned herself not to let down her guard.

“Well, that didn’t work out as I’d hoped,” he responded, somewhat defeated. He had tried to engage in a bit of psychological warfare, but it seemed he had only helped her. Once people learned to accept their shortcomings and take criticism seriously and fix their flaws, they were far quicker to learn and grow. Hveðrungr knew that from bitter experience. After all, there was another person like that in his life: Suoh Yuuto, a man he found more irritating than anyone else in the world.

“Heh, no point in trying to upset me with words. I told you it won’t work anymore.”

“Seems so. I suppose I should start taking this seriously.” Hveðrungr adjusted

his sword, shifted into a proper fighting stance, and let out a breath, focusing his attention entirely upon her. For the first time, Homura's expression tensed in response. To her, his murderous gaze was a source of terrible trauma for her. But that tension only lasted a moment.

"Heh. Hvesomething, you really are scary." Even as a bead of sweat trickled down her brow, Homura managed a smile in the face of death, readying her dagger. She had a tough heart. She had reined in her fear in an instant. However...

Hveðrungr lunged forward as he sensed an opportunity. There was the slightest ounce of tension, a very subtle awkwardness as Homura had regripped her dagger. Even if her mind had overcome her fear, her body had yet to fully adjust. It was an opening that Hveðrungr was never going to miss.

"Dangit!" Homura shouted as though to force her body into motion and lashed out with an attack of her own. The exchange of blows resumed—

"Whoa?!" Homura was the one who let out a cry of surprise. Their exchange was a stalemate. No, if anything, Hveðrungr had a slight advantage. "So, you've finally gotten serious!"

"I've been serious this whole time, little girl. I just had an extra trick up my sleeve."

A sharp clang rang out as Hveðrungr's upward sweep knocked Homura's dagger skyward.

"Wha?!"

He had managed to pull that off partly due to the greater momentum behind his blow, but that wasn't the only thing working in his favor. He was in the Realm of Godspeed, a technique he had stolen from Sigrún during his time as patriarch of the Panther Clan. When combined with Sigyn's Fimbulvetr, it granted him a level of speed and strength that could be compared to Homura's. This was Hveðrungr's trump card. Still, his advantage would only last for so long. In a drawn-out fight, Homura's tension would eventually fade, her nerves would settle, and Hveðrungr would find himself on the back foot once again. He pushed forward to exploit his momentary advantage.

“Hrah!”

With a powerful shout, Hveðrungr unleashed a side-slash. He had her! Or so he thought. Instead, Homura vanished from his line of sight.

“What?!”

He felt a shiver run up his spine. It was just pure instinct. He jumped backward, his body reflexively recoiling.

“Guh!”

Much to his chagrin, he had been just a moment too slow. He felt a sharp pain, like a searing heat, run up his thigh.

“You really are kinda impressive, Hvesomething. I almost thought I was gonna die,” Homura stood up and said with a smile.

She had ducked, making it appear as though she had vanished. But that alone wasn’t enough to explain what had happened. Currently, Hveðrungr’s mind was in the Realm of Godspeed, perceiving time to be flowing more slowly. Even a twin-runed Einherjar shouldn’t have been able to move fast enough for him to lose sight of her.

“But thanks to you, I’m in a new world. It’s so weird. Everything looks so slow.”

“You can’t be serious!”

Hveðrungr clutched at his leg as he felt despair overcome him. Just how much stronger was she going to become?

“How did you enter the Realm of Godspeed...?”

“Oh, so that’s what this is called. I see... So that’s how you got so fast, Hvesomething.”

With that, Homura slashed with her dagger. It made a completely different sound as it cut through the air. Even within the Realm of Godspeed, Hveðrungr could barely catch the flash of the blade’s movement.

“But, with that leg, I guess you’re done,” Homura looked at Hveðrungr’s right leg and said with a slightly disappointed expression on her face. The leg was still

attached, but he was bleeding profusely.

“Guh... Nrrgh.”

He knew he was in trouble, and Hveðrungr attempted to bring his sword up, but his leg couldn't hold his weight and he faltered. There was no way he could move properly on this leg. What to do? He desperately tried to come up with any sort of solution, but they weren't so easily forthcoming, and in that same span of time, Homura was closing the distance to finish him off. Hveðrungr slowly backed away, as though intimidated by her approach. A step. Then another.

“Ah.”

His left heel found no surface to rest on. He had been driven to the edge of the roof.

“Dammit!”

He tried to ward her off with a wave of his sword.

“Guh!”

Before he could complete the swing, Homura kicked his arm. The pain made Hveðrungr drop his sword.

“*Felicia...*”

In that moment, the image Hveðrungr saw was the dissatisfied glare of his one and only blood sibling, his little sister Felicia. “*Oh come on, not now,*” Hveðrungr thought. This felt too much like he was about to die. He had no intention of dying in a place like this.

“Thanks for everything, Hvesomething. It's all thanks to you that I've gotten stronger.”

Homura slowly raised her dagger and she ruthlessly brought it down. Blood sprayed into the air.

“Brother?!”

Felicia turned around, convinced she had heard someone call her name, but

there was no one there to greet her. It had only been her imagination. Nonetheless, she couldn't shake a bad feeling in the pit of her stomach.

"Felicia?"

"My apologies... It appears I was mistaken. Please don't worry."

Felicia lightly shook her head in response to Yuuto's query. They were in the middle of a fighting retreat. The situation was extremely tense, and she couldn't distract Yuuto with something as vague as a bad feeling. Felicia lightly smacked her own cheeks to refocus her attention.

"Y-Your Majesty! The enemy is already approaching the gates of the palace!"

She felt a sharp squeeze on her heart at the terrible news from the radio receiver. The enemy being at the palace meant they had broken through the rear guard. Her heart ached as it pounded in her chest.

"What?! That's far too early! What about Brother Rungr?!" Yuuto said, clearly shocked by the report that had just come in over the radio.

"Th-There's no word on his status," the voice replied sheepishly.

"Hey, Rungr! It's Yuuto! Answer me!" Yuuto shouted into his handset with a note of panic. Hveðrungr was one of Yuuto's most valued subordinates and had been given his own radio receiver. However, despite several attempts at reaching him, there was no response from Hveðrungr through the radio.

"Oh no... Brother..."

Felicia felt the blood drain from her features. At one point in time, she resented him to the point where she wanted him to die, but he was still someone that had been with her since the day she was born. The idea that she would never see him again made her body tremble in fear.

"No, not yet, Felicia. It's too early to give up," Yuuto called over to Felicia, attempting to reassure her. Her distress was plain to see. Indeed, the battlefield was a place where information was quickly distorted and lost—whether that was due to a breakdown in communication or intentional misinformation on the enemy's part. It wasn't unusual for someone who was reported as alive to actually be dead or vice versa. The key was to avoid letting that information

send her into a state of panic. She needed to look past that and continue to do her job, regardless of her feelings at the time. Felicia's years of experience serving at Yuuto's side were unmatched by any other person on Yggdrasil. She was the only one who could provide adequate support to him.

Somewhat reinvigorated thanks to Yuuto's encouragement, Felicia bit down on her lip and resumed running, silently offering a prayer. *"Please be alive, brother... I'll at least let you hold the baby."*

"You daft fool!"

The anger in Nobunaga's voice shook the very air itself, and his fist came down hard on Homura's head. While Nobunaga was known for being easy on his kin, there were limits. Even he wasn't going to let his daughter get away with ignoring orders and chasing after a personal vendetta during this climactic battle for control of Yggdrasil. "You're my heir, are you not? A general must always keep their eye on the bigger picture."

Still, considering that there were tales of Nobunaga executing ladies in waiting who had gotten carried away with carousing during his absence from Azuchi Castle, a single blow to the head was still letting Homura off easily.

"Oww... Yes... I'm sorry," Homura held her head, tears welling in her eyes as she apologized to her father.

Nobunaga let out a long sigh, then paused for a moment before asking, "So, did you win?"

"Yeah. I brought this as a memento," she replied gleefully as she twirled a familiar-looking mask atop her index finger. It was, without a doubt, the mask that the enemy general Hveðrungr had worn.

"Glad to hear it."

Nobunaga's expression quickly turned from one of anger to a playful grin. To his daughter, settling the score with Hveðrungr had been a vital rite, one where she had overcome the only opponent who had ever made her truly fear for her life. While he had believed Homura would be able to do so, there had still been a part of him that had worried. Of course, if she had been unable to step

forward when she knew her life was on the line, she wouldn't have been worthy of being his heir. In that sense, Homura had finally proven her worth as a ruler. As a parent and as a leader, there was nothing that gave him greater joy.

A Flame Clan messenger approached, delivering the following report: "I bring word, My Lord! We have finished destroying the Steel Clan's rear guard! The vanguard is currently positioned in front of the main gate and is awaiting your word to attack."

"Very well."

Nobunaga nodded with satisfaction as he listened to the report. While the Flame Clan had suffered some losses, they had been below his expectations. Surrounding the commanders with defensive formations as they advanced had worked as planned. Almost all of the losses had been sustained by the conscripted soldiers and had done little to weaken the army's main body.

"And what is the state of the Steel Clan Army?" Nobunaga asked.

"According to our scouts, the majority of their soldiers have broken and are currently fleeing the battlefield. Approximately three thousand under Suoh Yuuto are believed to have taken refuge inside Valaskjálf Palace," the messenger replied.

"Oh? So he intends to fight to the end..." Nobunaga's eyes widened in surprise. He had thought Yuuto would abandon the palace and flee to Jötunheimr long before things had progressed to this point. Perhaps he had some card left to play in a vain attempt to try to turn the odds? Or was he simply trying to buy time for his people and soldiers? Given Suoh Yuuto's personality, both were strong possibilities.

"Heh. He certainly doesn't disappoint, even to the very end," Nobunaga said with a predatory grin that would have frightened off a tiger. The most likely scenario was that Yuuto was trying to buy time. The vast majority of the Steel Clan's forces were in a panicked retreat, abandoning their ruler and running for their lives. It seemed unlikely this was a feigned retreat. Even the three thousand left in the palace were probably rather disorganized at this point. No matter what schemes he had up his sleeve, Yuuto stood no chance against the

sixty-thousand-strong Flame Clan Army—or so his rational mind told him. But he couldn't let go of the possibility there was something still waiting, that Yuuto had something remarkable left up his sleeve, that if he attacked now, he would suffer terrible losses.

“The young lad—nay, that great man—is quite impressive. He's achieved quite the feat to have made me behave so cautiously!” Nobunaga gripped his hand into a fist. His hand felt clammy, and his back was slick with sweat. “However! A conqueror as great as myself can't possibly turn back here!”

He still had the greatest opportunity to end the war right here. While it was true that a commander needed to be cautious, they also needed to be able to identify opportunities as they arose. Those that were cautious but didn't exploit opportunities were mere cowards.

“Salk!” Nobunaga thunderously called for the old general.

“My Lord,” he replied dutifully.

“Send the eastern division to pursue the broken remnants of the Steel Clan Army fleeing the city. The western division is to watch the area around Glaðsheimr. It's also very possible that they might use a hidden route to flee the city limits. Don't let them escape!”

“Yes, My Lord. I'll send the messengers at once.” The old man, despite being over seventy years of age, nodded briskly, then ran off to send the necessary messengers off to the respective divisions. Salk was well aware that Nobunaga was a ruthless master, willing to cast aside even an old hand like him if he wasn't able to pull his own weight.

“Homura!”

“Yes?!” When Nobunaga called her name, Homura stood crisply at attention. Evidently, even a twin-runed Einherjar was intimidated by a conqueror of the Warring States Period.

“Your punishment for disobeying orders. Take the Akazonae and lead the vanguard,” he stated coldly and clearly.

“Wha?!”

This order sent a ripple of confusion and surprise through the various officers and bodyguards assembled around him. It went without saying that the vanguard was the most dangerous position in battle. Sending his one and only heir to command it must have seemed like madness to them. But Nobunaga had his own reasons for making that choice.

“No doubt there are Einherjar waiting with Suoh Yuuto. Homura, you should be able to find them easily,” Nobunaga explained.

With those words, the officers understood Nobunaga’s reasoning. Every native of Yggdrasil knew the vast extent of the Valaskjálf Palace grounds. It was large enough to swallow a small city or two. Randomly searching for a single man on those grounds would give the enemy time to regroup. Nobunaga had no intention of giving Yuuto any chance of counter-attacking.

“Of course, I’ll be right behind you with the main body. Our one and only objective is to claim the head of Suoh Yuuto! Pay no heed to the rabble. Focus solely on that objective!” Nobunaga yelled out to his men.

“Huff, huff... Phew. We should at least be able to take a short break now.”

Yuuto sat down tiredly the moment he reached the throne room in the deepest section of the Valaskjálf Palace. He had just experienced a nerve-wracking battle against Nobunaga followed by a five-kilometer run. Despite having spent the last four years training, it had still taken its toll on him.

“We’re missing a lot of faces,” Yuuto said, sighing grimly as he looked over the remaining officers. Their numbers had dwindled. Some were still fighting their way to the palace or had fled the city of Gláðsheimr, while others like Sigrún and the Maidens of the Waves had been killed in battle.

“If only I had done better... I’m sorry, everyone,” Yuuto bowed his head, his voice trembling with regret. He had been focused solely on getting away until now, but with that accomplished, the second-guessing had started again in his head. Maybe he could have come up with a better plan. Perhaps he could have done things differently at a certain point in the battle. The regrets bubbled up one after another in his mind.

“Big Brother, please don’t blame yourself. If it hadn’t been you in command,

we wouldn't have held out this long," Felicia replied. "No matter how close it might be, in the end, there's no point if we lose. There's no point if we die."

Felicia's attempt at comforting him did little to raise his spirits, however.

No, perhaps he'd simply been overcome with hubris in believing that he could save all of his people. It had been egotistical of him to think that he could fight on equal footing with the conqueror of the Warring States Period, Oda Nobunaga. The smart thing to do would have been to abandon his empire, all of the strangers in it, and simply flee with his inner circle. If only he had done that, he wouldn't have lost Skáviðr or Sigrún. The same was true of Hveðrungr. He was missing in action, and he might very well already be dead...

"Your Majesty! The enemy's vanguard has entered the main palace grounds!"

"What?! How the heck did they get here that quickly?!"

Yuuto blinked in surprise at the sudden report from the Vindálf. While the Valaskjálf Palace was referred to as a single palace, it was not a single structure. It was actually made up of several dozen buildings. It was, in essence, a city built for the royals and nobility that made their home in Glaðsheimr. There were, of course, no maps of the palace itself, and there should have been no way for the Flame Clan to identify each building.

"How the hell did they figure out where we are?! Actually, is it even worth wondering about at this point?"

Yuuto forced his exhausted body to stand and turned his gaze to the throne. Underneath the throne itself was an entrance into the city's sewer system. It was an escape path for the Imperial family, and the sewers had exits located in various sections of the Valaskjálf Palace, the city of Glaðsheimr, and various points outside the city limits.

In the past, his late wife Sigrdrífa had used the passages to sneak out of the Holy Capital and travel, and more recently, the passages had been used during his guerrilla warfare to move his soldiers around the city. While part of the reason Yuuto had fled to the palace was to draw Nobunaga's attention and give his soldiers a chance to flee, he had also intended to use the passages to escape.

“Felicia.”

“Yes, what is it, Big Brother?”

When Yuuto called her name, Felicia quickly responded with a serious expression. Her expression was worn from a combination of fatigue and sadness, but her face was still breathtakingly beautiful. Thinking back on it, she had always been at his side since his arrival in Yggdrasil. While he had resented her when he had first been summoned, in the end, she had always been one of the people who had helped him.

“Big Brother?” Felicia furrowed her brow as Yuuto quietly gazed at her face. Oops, he’d been caught staring. With the jig up, Yuuto pointed at the throne and said evenly, “Take the others and escape through the sewers.”

“What?!” Felicia’s eyes went wide with surprise. It seemed the instructions had come as a complete shock. “And what do you intend to do, Big Brother...?” She then glared at him intently. While she had asked the question, it was clear she had already guessed his answer. He felt the anger that she was doing her best to contain. It took a great deal of courage to tell her given her expression, but he somehow managed to speak.

Yuuto took a deep breath before he said the words slowly. “I’ll stay with two hundred or so and hold them back.”

The entrance into the sewers was narrow, and only one person could go down it at a time using a rope ladder. It would take five or six hours for three thousand people to make their way down it. Someone needed to hold back their pursuers during that time.

“That’s what I thought you’d say... Truly, what a ridiculous suggestion, Big Brother! You’re the one who needs to use that route first and escape! Think of your position!”

“My position is why I’m saying this.”

Yuuto could only offer a forced smile at Felicia’s criticism. While intellectually, Yuuto knew that in an Imperial system, the emperor and his blood were the most valuable and most precious things and had to be protected at all costs, the idea simply didn’t resonate with him. He had grown used to Yggdrasil’s culture

during his time there, but when it came down to it, he had still been born and raised in 21st-century Japan. In his formative years, he had seen CEOs take responsibility and resign after corporate scandals on TV, while politicians were supposed to be servants of the people, working for the public good. Those values were still thoroughly rooted in his mind.

“I have no intention of dying. I’ll find the right opportunity and follow you,” he explained calmly.

There was still a lot he had to do. There was also Mitsuki and their children. He couldn’t afford to die yet.

“Easier said than done. You know better than anyone how hard it would be to actually do it, do you not?” Felicia protested.

“Aunt Felicia is correct, Father! I’ll serve as the rear guard.”

“Howww can you possibly do thaaaat in your staaate, my laaady? I’ll serrrve as the reaaar guard insteaad.”

Fagrahvél and Bára each volunteered to lead Yuuto’s proposed distraction force. However, Fagrahvél was deeply exhausted from using Gjallarhorn and couldn’t even stand upright on her own, while Bára had suffered wounds to her head and dominant arm protecting Fagrahvél. On top of all that, they had lost many of their sworn comrades from the Maidens of the Waves. The pair looked pale and thoroughly exhausted. They had already done enough. He couldn’t ask more of them. Yuuto slowly shook his head.

“I can’t very well run away and let women fight for me. I’m the one who started this war. It’s only right that I take responsibility for it.”

If Yuuto hadn’t wanted to save everyone, many others would still be alive. The ones still here were the ones who had followed him to the end. Even if he knew it was just to satisfy his own conscience, he didn’t want to lose any more of them. The job of a commander was to save as many of his people as possible. In that sense, objectively, he was the one best suited for this task. He was the best tactician among the remaining people. However...

“Father! Please reconsider!”

“Yes. Place more value on your life.”

“Who would lead the people without you, Father?!”

It was clear the others didn't agree, and they voiced their objections vociferously. It was, perhaps, understandable, but Yuuto had no intention of backing down.

“Quiet! I'm giving you these orders as your sworn father and as the þjóðann!”

Yuuto chose that moment to wield his authority. With the Chalice and his authority as þjóðann behind him, even his officers were forced into silence. The orders of one's sworn father were absolute in their world. The room fell into an uncomfortable silence.

“Why will you not allow me to be by your side?”

The voice that broke that silence was cold but filled with anger. Despite having known her for four years, this was the first time he had heard her voice take on that tone. When he turned around, he saw Felicia staring at him with a mix of sadness and anger in her gaze.

“While you always seem gentle and flexible, you're also a very determined person. Given what you've said, I know you have no intention of overturning your orders. I've known you for long enough to understand that is the case,” Felicia said calmly as she held back the torrent of emotions roiling deep within. But in the midst of her sentence, tears began to fall from her cheeks. Once the dam had broken, she couldn't stop the flow of her emotions.

“But I'm your adjutant, Big Brother! Why are you telling me to leave your side at such an important time?!” Felicia shouted, her voice shrill as her face was streaked with tears. Even under the circumstances, Yuuto couldn't help but find that sight precious and dear. Which was exactly why...

“Because I don't want you to die under any circumstances,” Yuuto said flatly with a heavy sigh. This was war. He had already lost several people close to him. He had thought he had been ready. But when he had heard Sigrún was dead, he simply couldn't handle it. “It hurts to admit, but I'm scared at the thought of losing you too.”

“Scared?”

“Yes, frightened out of my mind. Far more than the thought of my own death.

That's why I need you to go... I can keep fighting if I know you're alive."

"Even under these circumstances, I'm extremely happy to hear that you feel so strongly for me. But, I'm afraid I still can't follow your orders."

"Felicia!" Yuuto shouted in frustration. His tone pleaded with her to listen. But Felicia simply shook her head.

"No. I feel the same way, Big Brother. I'm afraid of losing you more than anything. If I were to lose you, I couldn't possibly go on living. Please, let me protect you by your side."



Yuuto found himself at a loss for words. It was a tearful plea from a woman he loved. He'd be lying if it didn't make him reconsider.

Yuuto gritted his teeth and grimly gave the order, "I'm going to say it again. This is an order. You need to run."

"Big Brother!"

"You have to listen to me. We don't have time for further debate. Go!" With that statement, Yuuto turned his back to her. He knew he was hurting her. But this was something he needed her to listen to.

"I see..."

He heard her crestfallen voice from behind. She must have realized it was useless to argue any further. He really did feel guilty for doing what he had, but he felt a surge of relief at the same time.

"In that case... I'm afraid to inconvenience you, but I will be returning your Chalice. Thank you for taking care of me all this time."

"Huh?"

Yuuto turned around, slack-jawed in shock at the unexpected response. He expected her to say goodbye, but why would she return his Chalice? As his mind struggled to process what she had just said, Felicia continued.

"I am no longer your sister, and you are no longer my brother. We're total strangers. Because of that, I have no reason to listen to your orders. As such, I'll be staying and fighting."

"Whaat?!"

He finally understood Felicia's intentions. He hadn't remotely imagined she'd use such an absurd loophole. Still, Yuuto wasn't one to give up that easily.

"Then this is my direct order as þjóðann!"

They were orders from the divine emperor of Yggdrasil. He figured she wouldn't be able to disobey, but...

"I'm afraid my loyalty is sworn only to the person I accepted as my Big Brother. I have no memory of extending that loyalty to the þjóðann," Felicia

said without the slightest hesitation. He could have sworn Felicia seemed to be extremely respectful to Rífa when she had discovered Rífa was the þjóðann, but he figured she'd play dumb if he pointed that out.

"Hey, you lot! Drag her out of here!"

"Oh? Do you really think mere strength is enough to deal with me?"

With that, Felicia snapped the whip she had somehow taken into her hand, the sound echoing through the room. That simple action forced everyone around her to swallow. While she had never made much of a name for herself in battle, Felicia was a highly skilled Einherjar herself. Even though she wasn't anywhere near as accomplished a fighter as someone like Sigrún, she was still far superior to the average Einherjar. Moreover, she was by far the strongest individual in the room. Of course, they would probably be able to restrain her if they all swarmed her at once, but with the Flame Clan Army just moments away, now was hardly the time to be squabbling like that amongst themselves.

"Fine! You win. Come along with me!" Yuuto threw his hands up into the air and shouted with exasperation. He couldn't think of any way to get her to leave before him. In that case, it was much better to have her by his side than have her fighting at random on her own. "However! Make damned sure you don't die!"

"Of course. I promised Big Sister Mitsuki that I'd come home safely with you. And, well..." Having said her piece, Felicia's lips twisted into a warm smile.

"And what?"

"Well, that will stay a secret." Felicia placed her index finger over her lips and smiled. She looked so happy at that moment that Yuuto almost found himself gawking.

"You can't just say that and stop there. Come on."

"I'll tell you when we've safely gotten through this."

Evidently, she wasn't going to tell him no matter how much he pushed her. Still, they had known each other for a long time. Yuuto had a rough sense of what it might be based on her expression, but he wasn't going to say it aloud. It would make him want to tell her to get out of here again, and if he did, they'd

just end up in the same loop they had been stuck in earlier. It would be a complete waste of time. That meant there was only one thing to do.

“Then I guess I have no choice but to survive this.”

After all, it was a father’s job to protect both mother and child.

“Oh come on! This place is too big! And the roads are still weird!”

Homura stamped her feet in frustration as she proceeded through the halls of the main palace with her soldiers. Valaskjálf Palace’s paths were complex and winding for defensive purposes, practically a labyrinth in their own right. It had already been two hours since they had set foot in the palace grounds and over half an hour since they had gotten to the main building. Even someone older and more patient than Homura would be understandably irritated at these maze-like corridors.

“Y-Yes. It’s far too large.”

“Quite annoying.”

The Flame Clan soldiers accompanying her were all dressed in armor that was painted red. They were the Akazonae Unit—Homura’s bodyguard that Nobunaga had chosen from the best of the best in his entire army. They had been gathered with no regard to breeding or manners, and quite a few of them were mere ruffians.

“I’m thirsty! Water!”

“Yes, my lady!”

Still, even they were prim and proper in front of Homura herself. After all, Homura was a child, and an angry child often had no conception of boundaries and could do just about anything. Furthermore, their own strength was useless against hers. If they ran, she’d find them immediately and drag them back. They had no choice but to stay quiet and obey.

“Your Highness, how much farther do we have to go?”

The only one who seemed unintimidated by Homura and addressed her firmly was Arako, one of the Five Blades of the Flame Clan. Nobunaga had approved of

his extremely straightforward and extraordinarily stubborn personality that remained unflinching even in front of Homura. His personality was precisely why he had been assigned to lead Homura's tutors. Homura herself wasn't particularly fond of this nagging middle-aged man, but Nobunaga had ordered her not to hurt him and to listen to him, so she had been forced to let him remain by her side.

"Hrm, not too much. There's three Einherjar in here, I think."

"Oh? Well then, we're in for a treat," Gatu, another of the Five Blades of the Flame Clan, said with a chuckle. He was the second-in-command of the Akazonae Unit, and while he was more easygoing and friendly than Arako, Homura still found him difficult to deal with.

"Not really. I don't feel that much power coming from them."

At this distance, she could figure out the strength of the person's ásmegin. Of course, ásmegin wasn't the only measure of strength, but it was roughly correlated with physical ability. Based on her observations, the three Einherjar ahead were maybe average at best, not much to look forward to in that regard.

"Hvesomething was pretty unique, I guess."

Homura let out a sigh of disappointment. After experiencing a fight with that man, all of her other fighting had felt like just dealing with chores and bored her. The ones who had served as the Steel Clan's rear guard had been too easy to deal with, a complete disappointment for her. Honestly, she was tired of fighting the rank and file. Right now, she really wanted to fight someone who would present something of a challenge.

"But, well, daddy told me to bring him Suoh Yuuto's head."

Homura nodded to herself and refocused on the task at hand. Even if it wasn't particularly interesting, she would be happy to see her father's approving face when she succeeded. She felt a warmth in her heart at that thought. It was enough to keep motivating Homura under just about any circumstances.

"Oh, seems like that's the place."

Homura pointed to a door at the end of a hallway. She felt the presence of at least a hundred or so people crammed into the room. It was probably an

ambush of some sort, but such things were completely meaningless against Homura.

“Well then... Let’s go kill them.”

After licking her lips, Homura shot forward like a cannonball. Her red-armored companions hurriedly ran to join her. The monster in the form of a little girl was coming to finish off the Steel Clan.

ACT 5

“So this is the main hall...”

Even Nobunaga couldn't help but be impressed and let out a sigh of admiration as he stood before the impressively looming main hall of the Valaskjálf Palace. Unlike the soaring multi-story castles of Japan, it was more of a horizontally sprawling building, but it was still a gigantic edifice, with everything from steps leading to the entrance, the entrance itself, the decorative columns, the doors, and the building itself built as though created for a race of giants. No doubt it was built this way to show off the power of the þjóðann to any visitors. Of course, Nobunaga wasn't one to be swallowed by the building's sheer scale, but he was still surprised by just how massive they'd made it.

“I had heard it was built two hundred years ago, but it's still impressively clean.”

Despite having been struck by two great earthquakes, there were no visible signs of damage at first glance. Fittingly for the living quarters of the þjóðann, it was a solid work of construction. The gardens surrounding the main hall were also a sight to behold—the late autumn brought out a menagerie of bright reds and yellows that caught the eye. Leaves had fallen from the trees and danced in the breeze before they landed upon a carpet of red, orange, and yellow on the ground. It was a serenely beautiful sight.

“To have done all this—to bankrupt your dynasty and destroy the throne's authority in a single reign—was surely both stupid and pointless,” Nobunaga said, letting out a faintly derisive snort. Judging by the elegance and scale of this sprawling palace complex, Wotan, the first þjóðann and founder of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire, must have wielded enormous power. However, by the time the second þjóðann had begun their reign, the þjóðann had already become a mere figurehead, wielding only ceremonial authority. That made Wotan's efforts to unify the warring clans and bring them under a single banner ultimately useless.

“Something to bear in mind for myself,” Nobunaga said with a mildly self-deprecating chuckle. Hideyoshi had taken power from his own clan in Japan after his disappearance. He, perhaps, had no room to throw stones at other dynasts. “Creation was simple, but maintaining a reign is difficult, I suppose.”

What Nobunaga referred to was a lesson from the Annals of Zhenguan Politicians—a set of political treatises published during China’s Tang Dynasty. It conveyed the difficulty of protecting, growing, and maintaining a reign compared to simply starting a new dynasty. Nobunaga himself agreed wholeheartedly with that lesson. It was a sentiment that struck him as particularly salient now, as disease ravaged his body and the end of his life drew nearer. He constantly pondered how best to extinguish any potential political threats before passing on the reign to Homura. Part of the reason he had assigned Homura to lead the vanguard was to show her strength to as many soldiers as possible, while also allowing her to earn the necessary military achievements to cement her status as Nobunaga’s successor. Given that Yggdrasil put little value on bloodlines, it was the most effective way for him to secure her position.

“No, no, now is hardly the time to be thinking about this. It would be remarkably self-defeating to neglect the present while worrying about the future.”

Nobunaga chastised himself for letting his confidence in victory make him less wary. He knew that victory could slip from his fingers if he grew overconfident. The most important phase of any undertaking was completing it. What was most important right now was finding Suoh Yuuto and putting an end to him once and for all. Everything else would come after. With a renewed sense of purpose, Nobunaga led the main body of his army into the main palace hall.

The distant sounds of clashing blades and shouting echoed toward the throne room.

“Seems like the fighting’s started.”

As he listened to the battle taking place in the rooms beyond the wall, Yuuto closed his eyes and sank into a focused state. Thanks to the power of the twin

runes Rífa had gifted him, he was able to sense the movements of people within the palace from this distance. However, as he was forcibly drawing the rune's ability out despite the limiting powers of the Gleipnirs that held it in check, he couldn't use it too freely. There was no point in holding it back for later though—he needed it now.

“Wha?!” Yuuto was struck speechless as he looked into the state of the room beyond. Although there had been thirty soldiers stationed there, over half of them had already fallen—and in less than a minute of fighting, no less. By all accounts, that should have been impossible. “Wh-What the hell is that?!”

He felt a presence that shot around the room in every possible direction like a bullet ricocheting off the walls. It would have made more sense to him if he were told that it was a monkey or some sort of predatory cat. There was only one person he knew that was capable of that sort of ludicrous movement.

“So, that's Homura...” he said aloud to himself, both alarmed and frustrated by her presence. He had learned much about her from Hveðrungr's report, but she was even more ridiculous than he had imagined. The soldiers in the room were slaughtered without being able to put up any resistance. In just a handful of minutes, the most elite soldiers of the Steel Clan Army were reduced to corpses bleeding out on the floor.

“Dammit! There's always some twin-runed Einherjar showing up to wreck my plans!” He couldn't help but grumble in response. The throne room of the Valaskjálf Palace was, as its name implied, where the þjóðann met with their subordinates or regional patriarchs. It was also connected to the þjóðann's bed chambers. In wartime, any enemies making their way toward it were forced to go through five different rooms garrisoned with soldiers. Additionally, the entrances to those rooms were narrow, while the inside of each was perhaps the size of a school classroom, making it easy for the defenders to force any intruder to face off against superior odds. Yuuto had intended to make use of this design to continually exploit local numeric superiority to slow down their pursuers, but he was now forced to completely rethink his tactics. He couldn't help but curse the rule-breaking nature that came with the presence of a twin-runed Einherjar.

“The men out there are doomed. They won't be able to buy us any time

whatsoever...” Yuuto stated, his concern clear in his tone. The Flame Clan vanguard had already entered the next room and was carrying out another one-sided massacre. Because the escape route required climbing down a ladder, there was a painfully hard limit on how quickly people could go down. It would take quite a bit more time for everyone present to escape. He did have one more card up his sleeve, but it wasn’t yet time to make use of it. But at this rate, it was clear they’d be caught before they were ready to make their escape.

“Big Brother, I’ll...!”

“Even you wouldn’t last more than a few seconds.”

Yuuto gritted his teeth. He had honestly underestimated Homura. He had believed that she was inferior to Steinþórr in combat ability, since the single-runed Hveðrungr had managed to outfight her. But that had been a massive misunderstanding on his part.

“Right now, under these circumstances, Homura might very well be stronger than Steinþórr,” Yuuto explained.

“Whaat?! Surely that can’t...”

“I’m afraid it’s true...”

She was extraordinarily fast, and she was capable of using walls and ceilings to make sudden and unpredictable movements. She was maneuvering in three dimensions. Soldiers who were trained to fight enemies on the ground had no way to deal with that. On top of that, her body was compact and hard to target. Even for Yuuto, the only reason he could follow her movements was that she was some distance away from him. If she had been in the same room, he was sure he would have lost track of her. In battle, speed was substantially more difficult to deal with than raw strength.

“Tch. Three rooms already?!”

It seemed that Homura was more focused on breaking through than wiping out all resistance. So far as Yuuto could tell, the young girl must have determined it was fine to leave any surviving Steel Clan soldiers to the Flame Clan forces that were following them. Ordinarily, a one-girl charge like this could be easily overwhelmed with pure numbers, but he couldn’t imagine

beating her even if he had an infinite number of regular soldiers. The battlefield maxim that the side with more men determined the course of battle was completely useless against her.

“They’ve broken through again! They’re pushing in way too fast! I don’t even have time to come up with a new plan!”

Ordinarily, Yuuto was good at adapting to unexpected developments. Indeed, his mind tended to work best under pressure, and at times, even seemed to become sharper as the circumstances worsened. However, even he wasn’t able to think of a viable response to the events unfolding before him. It was at that moment that he heard a stir from behind him.

“What is it?!”

It seemed something had happened in the throne room. However, regardless of how impressive his rune’s capabilities were, he couldn’t literally see through walls. He imagined the worst-case scenario. Perhaps the rope ladder had snapped? Bad news did tend to come in waves, after all. He wanted to check what was happening as soon as possible, but before he could do anything, the doors in front of him were blasted off their hinges. In the now open doorway stood a petite, cute girl who must have been about ten years old. Her face and clothing had been dyed red—drenched with blood, it would turn out. That incongruent combination of features made her all the more frightening.

“So you must be Homura, Oda Nobunaga’s daughter...”

The moment he murmured those words, Homura turned in his direction and caught his gaze. Yuuto felt a cold shudder run up his spine.

“Suoh Yuuto, I foound you!” Homura pointed her finger at Yuuto and smiled happily. It was an innocent, frightening smile, as though a child had found a new toy to break.

His first impression of Homura was, more than anything else, that she was quite small—only coming up to Yuuto’s chest if one were to stand him and her beside each other, so she was maybe a bit over a meter in height. On top of that, she was very slender. He was almost convinced he could’ve easily picked her up with one hand. Had she really been the one who had broken through the

layers of defenses manned by the Steel Clan's most elite soldiers? Her appearance was so delicate that the thought briefly crossed his mind. However, the thought was quickly wiped from his mind when she disappeared from view and blood sprayed all over the room.

"Don't underestimate her just because she's a child! Attack her together!"

Hearing Yuuto's order, the soldiers in the room let out a roar and attacked Homura in unison. While they may not have been supernaturally gifted Einherjar, they were still the most elite of the Steel Clan Army. They were professional warriors. They instinctively grasped that even against a child, their only chance was to use their numbers to their advantage. They quickly made the right decision, attacking from all sides without the faintest hint of hesitation at the fact that they were targeting what appeared to be a young child. It was the right decision, but what unfolded next was beyond their expectations...

"Guh!"

"Urgh!"

"Agh!"

Despite their best efforts, they were torn down with ease.

"Phew."

Homura jumped up, using one of the fallen Steel Clan soldiers as a springboard.

"Nrgh!"

"Ah!"

"Dammit!"

She bounced from head to head and quickly began approaching Yuuto. The soldiers tried their best to grab her or stab her with their swords, but by the time they reacted to her presence, the girl had already disappeared.

"And we're done!" Homura breezily jumped over the wall of soldiers and lunged toward Yuuto.

"Look out!"

Felicia broke in between them and blocked Homura's dagger. The reaction forced Homura to leap backward and land, where soldiers once again swarmed her in an attempt to take her down. Homura was much too quick for them, however. She shot forward like an arrow, leaving the soldiers' attacks cutting through empty space.

"Ahhh!"

Felicia was thrown backward, overwhelmed by Homura's superior strength and momentum when blocking her second attack.

"Huh, you're pretty good, lady. Not used to seeing someone block my attacks more than once."

Homura looked over at Felicia, impressed. A soldier attempted to attack her as she was busy looking in Felicia's direction, but Homura crouched to avoid his swings, then swept her leg out, tripping the soldier over before stomping her foot against his head.

"Guh!"

The soldier twitched on the ground for several seconds before going still. Homura had brought her foot down hard enough that the brick under the soldier's head had cracked. Even if he were still alive after that, he would almost certainly be suffering from a heavy concussion or worse. There was no way he was moving any time soon.

"P-Protect His Majesty!"

"Please fall back, Your Majesty!"

Two soldiers stood in front of Yuuto to protect him.

"Ack...!"

"No...!"

Although they attempted to put up a fight to defend their liege, they fell in the blink of an eye. These men were Yuuto's royal guard. They weren't weak by any stretch of the imagination. They were some of the most accomplished warriors in the clan. Despite that, they weren't able to muster any form of resistance against Homura.

“Bye-bye!”

With a cheery farewell, Homura thrust her dagger toward Yuuto’s heart. Yuuto was unable to respond to the sheer speed of Homura’s attack. Was this the end? Yuuto reflexively closed his eyes, awaiting the inevitable.

Even with eyes closed, the sharp clang of metal meeting metal was unmistakable. It seemed someone had managed to save him at the last moment. He let out a breath of relief and opened his eyes. As he did so, he froze. The back facing him was a familiar one. He saw the glint of silver hair flowing in front of him.

“Just in time, it seems.”

“Rún!”

The Mánagarmr, the Strongest Silver Wolf, had returned just when she was needed most.

“Rún, i-is it really you...?” Yuuto’s vision blurred with tears as he asked hopefully. He pinched his thigh to make certain he wasn’t dreaming. It hurt.

“You’re... You’re alive... You’re not a ghost...or spirit... Right?!” he asked with a trembling voice. He thought he would never see her again.

False information often spread across battlefields—it was a form of psychological warfare if harnessed properly, in fact. Up until this point, he hadn’t seen her body, which had made him want to hope she was still alive—that the news of her death was all a lie. Unfortunately, because the enemy had made such a scene of celebrating Sigrún’s death, the Múspell Unit had fled in retreat. When adding in the fact that there was no answer from her radio, he had to admit the chances of her still being alive at the time had been next to zero. Despite those odds, here she was, standing before him on her own two feet. She was alive, and he could see it for himself.

“I’m sorry to have caused you to worry. Let’s just say that rumors of my demise were somewhat exaggerated. I may not be in one piece, but I’m certainly alive,” Sigrún returned as she moved her sword to take up a battle stance against Homura, who had stopped in place, curiously looking at Sigrún as

though examining her. Seemingly having seen what she'd needed to, Homura's eyes sparkled with enthusiasm.

"Your silver hair! Are you the Sigrún everyone's talking about? The one who killed Shiba?" Homura asked excitedly.

"Yes, I am that Sigrún," she replied.

"Huh! So you're alive. The others said you'd been beaten," Homura said happily, despite having just discovered a powerful enemy had survived. Like Steinþórr, she perhaps was looking for someone that could compete with her.

"They did unhorse me and knock me out when I landed. I suppose they won a fight of some sort by managing that much," Sigrún answered with a serious expression. It was just like her to respond with a precise and honest appraisal of an enemy that had beaten her. That too drove home the point to Yuuto that it was really Sigrún.

"Imagine how much trouble you'd have been in if I hadn't picked you up and run away," Hildegard, Sigrún's protégé, butted in, shrugging her shoulders with exasperation.

"Oh, now it all makes sense..." Yuuto said, voicing his thoughts aloud. Everything finally fell into place in Yuuto's mind. The reason he hadn't been able to reach Sigrún was that she had been unconscious. It was likely that the stir he had heard earlier was because the supposedly dead Sigrún had appeared from the hidden passageway alive and well.

"Well, now I'm starting to see a ray of hope," he continued.

Things were still far from ideal, given that Sigrún's dominant hand was injured, but she was both in name and truth the greatest warrior of the Steel Clan, having fought the twin-runed Steinþórr several times and even defeating Shiba, the Flame Clan's greatest warrior. Hildegard, meanwhile, was one of the rising stars of the Múspell Unit who, in terms of raw physical ability, was even more gifted than Sigrún herself. While Felicia was a level below those two when it came to combat prowess, she had a large number of support abilities such as her galdrs. Additionally, she and Sigrún had known one another since they were young girls. They knew each other's minds as though they were blood sisters, and the two were extremely good at fighting together. Homura, with her twin

runes and overwhelming physical ability, was still an enormous threat, but with these three present, they now stood a chance.

“Everyone, buy me a little time! I have a plan! We’ve come this far! We’re all getting out of this alive!”

Yuuto shouted out encouragement and orders. He didn’t have any real combat skills of his own, which was why he had spent the last four years training whenever he had a free moment. Despite doing that, however, he hadn’t been able to become strong like any of the three women before him. It was frustrating. But there was no point in wishing for something he didn’t have in the middle of a crisis. All he could do now was what he was capable of doing under the circumstances. In the end, the one thing that he still had was his conniving brain.

Homura gazed intently at the silver-haired woman that had appeared in front of her. One of her twin runes controlled the energy of life. While she wasn’t able to control human beings, she was still able to feel the flow of life energy.

“Hmm... It looks like your right arm is hurt.”

The rest of Sigrún was flowing so brightly with ásmegin that it made Homura want to narrow her eyes, but the flow to her right arm was restricted—only a small trickle flowing into it.

“Yes. When I fought Shiba. A small price to pay for defeating a man like that, really,” Sigrún answered as she let her right arm hang limply at her side. Homura also noticed a fresh bruise around Sigrún’s elbow. Homura had heard Sigrún had fallen from her horse when fighting Arako and Gatu. She must have suffered that injury during that fight.

“That’s too bad. I would have wanted to fight you at full...strength!”

Seemingly done with talking, Homura relaxed her body and shot forward. It was a technique she had learned in her fight against the Maidens of the Waves. It reduced the amount of movement she had to make before attacking, leaving her opponents caught largely unaware when she suddenly bolted at them. When combined with Homura’s physical abilities that were rivaled only by the greatest of wild animals, opponents would often be left lying in a pool of blood

without even realizing what had happened. It didn't matter whether the opponent was a normal soldier or a seasoned Einherjar.

A sharp clang rang through the air as Sigrún easily blocked Homura's lunge.

"Whew, I'm impressed."

Homura smiled with amusement as the two locked blades. Sigrún hadn't appeared to be surprised in the least and had blocked the attack without the slightest difficulty. That meant that she was able to handle Homura's current movements. It explained why she was able to defeat Shiba.

"Still, it'd be more fun if you had both arms working."

Homura pushed forward, tightening her arm muscles.

"Really?"

Sigrún's blade suddenly went limp. Homura felt her upper body move forward as her momentum carried her.

"Yeah."

Homura showed no sign of being caught off-balance, instead using the momentum to twirl in place, loosing a backhanded blow against Sigrún. She had already dealt with this technique when she fought Hvesomething. While she had been surprised the first time she saw it, now that she knew how it worked, it was easy enough to deal with.

"Ah."

Sigrún drew her head backward at the last moment, and Homura's fist just barely missed her nose. Homura blinked as the counter that had worked so well against Hvesomething failed against Sigrún.

"Huh, you really are strong," Homura said.

"You too. But you should watch your surroundings a bit better," Sigrún replied.

Homura jumped backward as she heard an object slice through the air. A whip harmlessly cracked against the floor a split-second later. She caught sight of a blonde woman with a whip out of the corner of her eye. Homura turned in

slight irritation at her interruption, moving to deal with the blonde first when...

“Yah!”

Next came a slash from a red-haired girl. Homura blinked again at the attack. She was faster than anyone Homura had fought to this point. Of course, they were still no match for her. She casually deflected the blow with her dagger and then cut open the girl’s throat with her next slash...

...or so she had thought, but the redhead dodged the blade by a hair’s breadth and countered with another attack of her own. Homura easily avoided the attack again, then this time went for the girl’s heart. Once again, the blow was blocked, and the two began exchanging blows.

“Woow!”

Homura blinked again, this time in actual surprise. There had certainly been opponents who had been able to exchange blows with her, but overall, they had been focused on defense, looking for the briefest opening for a counterattack. This was the first time she had ever encountered an opponent who could match her blow for blow. This red-haired girl was able to keep up with her insane speed.

“You’re good!”

Homura let out an exclamation of praise as they exchanged blows. Of course, in terms of simple physical ability, Homura, with her twin runes, was several tiers above the girl, but she was making up for that gap by reading Homura’s attacks and using the minimum necessary movement to respond. Homura was tempted to let out a sigh of admiration at the graceful movements.

“I’m still better though!”

Homura won the exchange of blows, first using brute strength to deflect the redhead’s sword, then using her left elbow as though to sweep her aside.

“Guh!”

Hildegard was sent flying off to the side. But that wasn’t only because of the impact of Homura’s blow. She had jumped at the last moment to soften the blow. Hildegard’s reflexes were impressive.

“You really are amazing, redhead! Tell me your name!” Homura asked as she felt excitement bubble up inside her. This was the first time anyone had held up so well against her in a straight-up fight. It was natural that the girl would pique her curiosity.

“The name’s Hildegard. Protégé of Sigrún, the commander of the Múspell Unit,” the redhead—Hildegard—answered as she shook her left arm. It seemed intact even after absorbing Homura’s attack. The sight made Homura even happier.

“Hildegard, huh? Say, Hildegard, why don’t you become my subordinate?” Homura asked.

“Wha?” Hildegard replied, appearing quite dumbfounded.

“If you will, I’ll ask daddy to spare your life. I’m gonna take over the Flame Clan from daddy eventually, after all! I’d be open to making you my number one subordinate,” Homura followed up with a stream of words, even as Hildegard stared blankly at her. This sort of self-centered thinking belied Homura’s childishness.

“Huh, that’s a pretty fair appraisal of me. You’ve got a good eye for talent.”

“Right? Right?! So, will you?”

Homura felt another surge of happiness upon hearing what Hildegard had to say. That’s just how much Homura had grown to like the girl in this brief exchange. They were pretty close in age too. Maybe they could be friends.

“Not a chance!” Hildegard said with a bright smile.

“Huh? Wh-Wha?! Why?!”

Having expected a different response, Homura was confused by Hildegard’s refusal. She had felt that the girl in front of her understood her on a fundamental level. That Hildegard would get it. She had been so sure of it!

“You’re the sort I hate more than anything! You’re just a brat who thinks that everything will go your way just because you’re strong!” Hildegard said with an expression of pure disgust. Homura was shocked and hurt by being so thoroughly rejected. She’d grown to like Hildegard so quickly and so easily. Why

didn't Hildegard feel the same way?!

"Heheh."

"What is it, Mother Rún?"

"It's because she reminds you of your old self, right?"

"Quiet, please!"

Hildegard scowled at Sigrún's little jab. The exchange made them seem like they were close—almost like sisters even. Homura found it extraordinarily irritating.

"Fine... I get it. Then just die already!" Homura said coolly, readying her dagger. She'd thought she'd found a friend, but the rejection soured her affection into instant hate. If Hildegard wasn't going to follow her, if she wasn't going to listen to her, then there was no need for her in the world.

The battle between the group of Einherjar continued to grow in intensity. Hildegard continued to defend against the relentless attacks from Homura, even as she maintained her own counterattacks. It was an evenly matched exchange, but...

"Guh..."

As they exchanged blows, Homura began to gain the upper hand, and Hildegard let out a groan of pain.

"What the heck is her deal?! She's so strong!" she couldn't help but complain to herself.

Hildegard was confident in her own physical abilities. She was quite proud of being the most physically skilled in the Steel Clan. She was superior to Sigrún in that one regard, and while she wasn't quite as fast as the speed-focused Erna or as strong as the strength-focused Hrönn, the difference was small, and in terms of her overall combat prowess, she was far better than both of them. She had honestly started to wonder if she was the most physically gifted individual in Yggdrasil. Right now, however, she found herself getting shoved around by a brat that was maybe all of ten years old.

“So this is what a twin-runed Einherjar is capable of, huh?”

She had heard from Sigrún just what a twin-runed Einherjar was like, but now that she was fighting one, it was even more ridiculous than she had expected. She might actually be in trouble... Just as she was thinking that, however, Sigrún interrupted with perfect timing and Hildegard had time to catch her breath. Hildegard immediately regained her footing and resumed her own attack, and the three became embroiled in an exchange of sword blows.

“Urrrmph!”

Confronted with the well-coordinated attack from the pair, even someone as powerful as Homura was forced on the defensive, and she let out a grunt of pain. Hildegard and Sigrún had fought and trained together for a long time. They had sparred nearly every day and were well acquainted with one another’s thought processes, movements, trends, habits, and quirks. They each had an intuitive grasp of how the other would move and how best to time their own movements in response. Two of the greatest warriors on Yggdrasil were attacking in unison. This wasn’t simply addition between the two of them. Their strength was practically multiplied by their cooperation. Even a twin-runed Einherjar wasn’t able to deal with it.

“Nrrrrgh... Huh?!”

Homura suddenly let out a yelp of surprise—she had been just a fraction of a second too slow in reacting. Hildegard immediately knew what had happened. It was Felicia’s galdr. Because her mentor Sigrún and Felicia were such close friends, she had seen Felicia’s galdrs up close.

“I can see why she’s His Majesty’s adjutant!”

Felicia’s timing had been perfect. In a battle between masters, the smallest delay could make all the difference.

“Hyah!”

“Yah!”

Hildegard and Sigrún let loose with their best attacks in unison. It was impossible to avoid or block them both—at least one of the strikes would connect. It should have ended things, but...

“Ah?!”

“Wha?!”

Homura suddenly appeared far in the distance—it was almost as though she had teleported away.

“She... She wasn’t showing her full strength yet?!” Hildegard murmured as a shiver ran up her spine. Homura’s movement just now was much faster than it had been earlier. Even Hildegard had barely been able to follow her.

“No, that’s not it... She was in the Realm of Godspeed,” Sigrún explained calmly.

“Whaat?! Isn’t that your...?!”

Since it was something that was only used in times of absolute need, Hildegard had yet to see it for herself, but it was Sigrún’s ace in the hole—a state where Sigrún’s perception of time slowed and her physical abilities shot up.

“Yup. That’s what Hvesomething called it,” Homura replied, smiling as her dagger whirled in a slash in midair. It was much faster and sharper than it had been earlier.

“You spoke with him?! What did you do to my big brother?!” Felicia suddenly shouted with a sharp look. Hildegard tilted her head in confusion for a moment. When Homura said “Hvesomething,” she was probably referring to the former Panther Clan patriarch Hveðrungr. It was true that he and Felicia were Chalice siblings through Yuuto, but she could have sworn Felicia was the elder of the two.

“Don’t get distracted, Hilda! Focus on the fight!”

“O-Oh! Yes ma’am!”

Hildegard threw aside her previous question at Sigrún’s order. She was totally right—this wasn’t an opponent they could beat if she wasn’t giving this fight her full attention.

“Oh? Are you his little sister? I’m sorry, I killed him,” Homura replied and stuck out her tongue apologetically, as though she had just confessed to a little

prank.

“N-No way... I-I’ll make you pay!” Felicia lashed out with her whip in anger. Of course, there was no way such an attack would actually hit Homura in her current state. She dodged it without the slightest trouble and closed the distance between them in the blink of an eye.

“I’ll send you to where Hvesomething is so you’re not lonely.”

With that, Homura loosed her dagger at Felicia’s chest. Felicia hadn’t been able to respond at all. Thankfully, a sharp clang rang out as the deadly blade was intercepted at the last moment.

“That’s an unwanted kindness,” Sigrún said in a cold, low tone, her voice filled with hostility. Sigrún had just moved much faster than Hildegard had ever seen her move. She must have entered the Realm of Godspeed as well. All to protect her best friend.

“Stay back!”

Hildegard immediately tried to intervene as well, but a harsh order stopped her in her tracks. She hurriedly stopped in place.

“Without Godspeed, you’ll be utterly outmatched. Stay back!”

“B-But...”

Hildegard couldn’t help but hesitate. If Sigrún had been fully healthy, Hildegard would have obeyed and trusted that her mentor would win. But as things stood, Sigrún wasn’t able to use her dominant hand. On top of that, she had pushed herself by making use of the Realm of Godspeed extensively in the recent battle. Ordinarily, that should have caused enough fatigue and pain to incapacitate Sigrún. She was only pushing back that pain through sheer force of will. There was no way she could maintain this usage of Godspeed for an extended period.

“I-I’ll...”

Just as Hildegard was about to say she was going to help, Sigrún let out a grunt of pain. It seemed she had somehow blocked Homura’s dagger with her sword, but Homura’s left fist was planted squarely in Sigrún’s flank. Sigrún sank

to her knees in pain.

“Huh, that’s amazing. You managed to react even when I’m in this state. I wish I could’ve fought you when you weren’t hurt.”

A mixture of both impressed and disappointed, Homura arrogantly gazed down at Sigrún and raised her dagger. Hildegard watched on in horror.

“Mother Rún is going to die...” Just as the thought crossed her mind, Hildegard’s awareness cut off entirely—and the beast that had slumbered deep inside her woke.

Homura’s cold voice came down toward Sigrún. “Huh, that’s amazing. You managed to react even when I’m in this state. I wish I could’ve fought you when you weren’t hurt.”

She knew she was in danger. She had to move, but she couldn’t even catch her breath.

“Father... I’m sorry.”

Sigrún steeled herself for her death.

Suddenly, a red shadow pounced upon Homura.

“H-Hilda?!”

For a moment, Sigrún wasn’t sure what she was seeing. Hildegard snarled ferociously as she leaped at Homura, ásmegin flowing from her like a torrent.

“Wh-Whoa!”

Homura hurriedly blocked Hildegard’s slash, but the sheer strength and momentum behind the attack forced her to lose her footing. Hildegard followed up without a moment’s delay, and the pair began an intense exchange of blows.

“R-Rún. Are you okay?” Felicia ran over with a look of concern.

“Yeah... Somehow.”

She took Felicia’s offered hand and somehow managed to stand up. Her flank still ached, and she found her sluggish body extremely irritating.

“That’s the thing she showed over a year ago the first time she fought you,

right?”

“Yeah, but we need to stop her.”

“Huh?! Why?! She’s holding her own against Homura!” Felicia said with surprise as Sigrún casually noted that Hildegard needed to snap out of it.

Yes, when Hildegard was in that state, she had massively increased physical abilities. In terms of pure speed, she was probably even faster than Sigrún in the Realm of Godspeed. But it also had a deadly flaw.



“She’s no different than a beast right now. She’s completely lost her ability to think. She can’t distinguish between friend and foe. This isn’t an opponent she can win against in that state...” Sigrún explained.

“She’s winning though. She also did it specifically to defend you,” Felicia replied.

“...True enough.”

Sigrún furrowed her brow at Felicia’s observation and watched Hildegard’s movements closely. She saw it almost at once.

“Graceful and without any unnecessary movement...” Sigrún blinked as she watched Hildegard. If anything, Hildegard’s movements were more refined than when she was conscious. Frankly, she would have liked to show the Múspells as an example of perfect form. Sigrún let out a chuckle. “Just how much did she practice, even as she pretended to slack off?”

Hildegard must have traced Sigrún’s movements and forms over the course of their uncountable sparring sessions until she had basically imprinted those movements on her unconscious self. That was the only thing Sigrún could believe would have made this possible. In fact, Hildegard hadn’t just copied her. She had adjusted and assimilated those movements as her own. She had arranged each form, each stroke, to better suit her own body shape and strength.

“You finally found your own blade, didn’t you, Hilda?”

Even though Sigrún knew this was hardly the time to be indulging in sentiment, Sigrún felt a warm surge of pride as she watched Hildegard fight. When she was conscious, Hildegard tended to have too many things distracting her from her fighting—her pride, her anxiety about proving herself, her desire to gain favor—making her movements sloppier and less refined. However, now that she was a berserk beast, driven only by her fighting instinct, all of those distractions had gone away. Silly girl. If only she’d just be herself, she would be this strong all on her own.

“Graaaaah!”

“Yaaaaah!”

The fight between the two continued to speed up. Homura, with her twin runes, still had a slight advantage in speed and strength, but Hildegard had bridged that gap with her accumulated technique. They were completely evenly matched.

“Grah?!”

“Guh!”

The moment their weapons clashed, both blades flew out of their hands. The clash of their superhuman destructive power had overwhelmed the strength of their grip. Ordinarily, the first reaction would be to recover one’s weapon. But caught up in the heat of the moment, neither of them did so. Instead, following their combat instincts, they attacked one another with their bare hands, unleashing punches at one another. Homura’s fist clipped Hildegard’s jaw and cut through the air, while Hildegard’s right fist landed squarely into Homura’s left cheek. The blows had landed almost simultaneously, but Hildegard had won the exchange. Homura’s body was slammed sidelong into the ground. Sigrún gripped her hand into a fist and let out a cheer.

“Well done, Hilda.”

Just as Sigrún was offering her words of praise, Hildegard collapsed as her knees buckled from under her. As though in exchange, the black-haired girl stood up at the same time.

“Owww. Huh? I only grazed her. Why’s she down?”

Homura blinked in surprise as blood ran down her nose. It seemed the victor herself was the most confused. Meanwhile, Hildegard’s eyes had rolled back into her head, and she was completely unconscious.

Sigrún had no way of knowing, but the extremely fast glancing blow on Hildegard’s jaw had rattled her brain, giving her a concussion. Of course, Homura hadn’t meant to do that, so it was a complete coincidence born of Hildegard dodging her blow, and Hildegard, who had landed a full blow on Homura, technically had won that exchange. But, of course, in a fight, luck often played its part. It was simply poor fortune on Hildegard’s part that Homura had gotten in a lucky blow.

“Well, I dunno what happened, but I guess I win this fight, right? You were really strong though, Hildegard. I guess I really am a good judge of talent. I didn’t think there was anyone who could fight me on equal terms.” Homura nodded contentedly, then after a moment’s thought, continued speaking. “It’d be a shame to kill her. I guess I’ll leave Hildegard alive for now,” Homura said as she pointed her index finger at Hildegard. It was an almost perfect example of the common trope that suggested a fistfight could bring people closer together. It seemed Homura had found both a worthy rival and a friend through that fight. Sigrún was grateful that Hildegard’s life was safe, however...

“You two have to die though. Daddy was clear. I need to bring him Suoh Yuuto’s head,” she said bluntly.

The question was how to stop this monster. The combination of nonstop fighting and her overuse of Godspeed meant Sigrún was near the very limit of her endurance. Felicia was unharmed, but with her ability, she might last all of five seconds. They were out of options.

“Hah. You think it’ll go that easily?”

But there was one person who hadn’t given up. A black-haired young man curled his lips into a cocky grin.

“Don’t put up a front. You have a similar aura to daddy, but your strength’s not that great. Bluffing doesn’t work on me,” Homura said and snorted derisively. It was true that under the circumstances, it seemed like a bluff. Sigrún, however, knew what he was up to. The grin on his face was a dead giveaway. Yuuto would only grin that way if he had a clearly charted course to victory.

“You’ll know soon if I’m bluffing or not. Ah, there it is.”

The sound of explosions rumbled around them. Soon after, the ground began to tremble, a thunderous roar of falling stone filling the air, as though heralding the very end of the world.

“How odd...”

Nobunaga furrowed his brow as he made his way through the hallways of the

main palace hall. His forces had advanced smoothly, facing little resistance as they pushed into the palace. So far as Nobunaga could tell, it didn't seem like they were walking into a trap either.

The vast majority of the Steel Clan's soldiers had lost contact with their chain of command and had fled. The Flame Clan Army had captured a few of the soldiers who had failed to get away, but they had all been completely demoralized by their army's defeat. That much was clear from their expressions.

The Flame Clan had heard that around three thousand Steel Clan troops had managed to escape into the palace, but with the state of the Steel Clan Army's morale, those men likely wouldn't end up being much of an obstacle. What this meant was that there weren't going to be any dangerous ambushes awaiting them. All of the signs pointed to a Flame Clan victory. And yet, something was really bothering Nobunaga. The farther he penetrated into the main palace, the stronger that feeling grew. "Not like I can stop now though..." he muttered to himself.

He had driven Yuuto into a corner, and he only needed one more move to finish him off. It would be one thing to hesitate if he was certain there was a trap waiting for him, but an unsettling feeling was not sufficient reason to retreat. But it was that thought that made him pause.

"There's no choice? There's no way I could retreat?" Nobunaga murmured in shock. He was starting to wonder if Yuuto was leading his thoughts in a specific direction. "No, no... Surely this is all unnecessary worry," he continued in an effort to reassure himself. Nobunaga shook his head from side to side. It wasn't possible. There was no way that was what was happening here. Although his rational mind told him this, he couldn't shake the uneasiness he felt. If anything, that feeling was only growing stronger. "Should I pull back and see what happens? No, if I do..."

It was just as he was weighing the thought in his mind that the thunderclap of explosions rang out from all sides. For a moment, he thought that combat had started in various parts of the palace. Unfortunately for him, the true meaning of those sounds was far worse. He heard a rumbling as though the very earth was giving way beneath him.

“Tch! It’s a trap! Retreat! Retreat!” Nobunaga clicked his tongue in annoyance, then barked out his orders as he ran toward the exit. Much to his chagrin, they were already quite deep into the main palace hall. Would they make it out in time? The walls and ceiling began to groan and shudder. The ceiling, the wall, and the pillars all began to lean inward.

“Tch. We’re not gonna make it!” he spat. The building around him swayed and then started to collapse in toward him. There was no way for him to avoid it... The heavy thuds of stone falling onto the ground shook the surrounding area. The Valaskjálf Palace—the symbol of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire with over two hundred years of history and tradition—met its end, collapsing into a gargantuan heap of rubble.

“Phew. Looks like we’re still alive,” Yuuto said, letting out a long sigh of relief as the tremors began to subside. He had reinforced the throne room and the garrison room ceilings and walls with Roman concrete in preparation for this scheme. Even so, it had been a gamble on whether or not they could bear that impact even with that help. In fact, despite their reinforcement, the walls had formed cracks as a result of bearing the bulk of the impact.

“S-Suoh Yuuto! Wh-Wh-What have you done?!” Homura shouted with a tense expression. Even she seemed anxious after hearing the cacophony that had echoed through the room. Yuuto curled his lips into a malicious smile.

“I brought down this entire palace over our heads,” he explained.

The Valaskjálf Palace itself had actually sustained serious damage from the two major earthquakes, and it had barely been left standing in the aftermath. In a stroke of magnificent foresight, Yuuto had decided to identify the major structural supports and have them stuffed full of gunpowder, then set them up with matchlocks as fuses. He had ordered the Vindálfs to ignite the fuses as the Flame Clan Army’s main body entered the main hall, timing it so the demolition charges would go off right as the Flame Clan troops approached the heart of the palace.

While Nobunaga was an extremely cautious and cunning strategist, when it came to actual battle, he often preferred to lead from the front. There were

plenty of tales of how he had cut down many an enemy with his own hand. He had likely done so because he knew that, for the soldiers, seeing their lord fight alongside them would motivate them more than anything else. Yuuto knew that in this most vital of battles, where the fate of Yggdrasil itself hung in the balance, Nobunaga wouldn't be able to resist leading the main body into the palace himself. With that conviction in mind, Yuuto had prepared this final trap for him.

Yuuto was a man who never let failure go to waste. He always prepared a second or even third backup plan in case things didn't work out. This last plan, the destruction of the Valaskjálf Palace itself, was the ace in the hole he had prepared, a final gamble to turn things around if he had lost the decisive battle.

"Your precious daddy was in the main hall, wasn't he? He's probably buried under rubble by now. If you don't hurry up and help him..." Yuuto said to Homura with a menacingly evil tone in his voice. Homura dashed off like a hare before Yuuto could even finish his sentence. He also sensed that the enemy soldiers in the garrison rooms in front of him had also made a hasty withdrawal. Homura, their commander, had retreated. It stood to reason they'd follow.

After confirming the Flame Clan Army had departed, Yuuto crumpled to the ground and let out a slow breath. He had known from Kristina's reports that Homura was extremely attached to her father. Given the sheer scale of the noise and explosions, he had hoped Homura would dart out to save her father if he phrased it that way. Of course, if she had attacked trying to avenge her father, Yuuto and the others had little left in the way of reserves, and she would have easily wiped them out. That, or if the explosions had been just a little stronger, they could just as easily have been crushed to death. It was a bluff that had just barely paid off in the end.

"Listen up! Let's use this opportunity to get out of here. Lend the injured a hand," Yuuto shouted to those present. There was no way to tell when Homura and her forces would return, and there was certainly no reason to stay put in this ruin. This was the best chance they had to escape.

"Sheesh... While I'm glad it worked out, I never want to play things that close to the wire ever again," Yuuto said, letting out a loud sigh as he faced the

throne. If he were being frank, he had felt on edge ever since they'd started their retreat. This was the kind of scheme that was only likely to succeed maybe one in ten times. There were many things that could have gone wrong—for example, he might not actually have managed to get Homura to leave, or the throne room might not have survived the demolition of the main hall. He was honestly impressed he'd gone all in on that ten percent chance and pulled through.

“Yes, indeed. Honestly, I doubted what I was hearing when you first explained the plan,” Felicia responded, chuckling with a forced smile as she shrugged her shoulders. She must have been thinking back to when Yuuto had first explained his crazy scheme. Yuuto himself joined in on the dry laugh. Thinking back on it, it had been quite a scene—he'd even had everyone at the war council meeting wondering if he'd gone mad.

The meeting had taken place the night before the decisive battle. Yuuto had gathered his most senior generals, and they had gone over contingency planning.

“We're going to purposefully lose and lure the enemy into the palace?!” Fagrahvél's cry of surprise rang through the throne room. Yuuto hurriedly clasped his hands over her mouth.

“Hey! Don't say that out loud! This is the most classified, top secret piece of information I've got.”

“Oh... M-My apologies,” Fagrahvél immediately came to her senses and she mumbled out words of apology. Yuuto judged that it was safe to let her speak and uncovered her mouth.

“Fagrahvél, you would do well to remember that silence is the most important part of scheming.”

“Yes... I-I have no excuse, Your Majesty...”

“So long as you understand, it's fine. Please be careful though.”

Yuuto placed his index finger over his lips to drive home that point. While he had already made sure to clear the rooms around the throne room beforehand,

he still didn't want to risk anything leaking from their meeting. There was no way they could afford to have the soldiers learn about this plan.

"Also, let me correct that. We're not going to lose on purpose. We're going to throw everything we have at this battle and make an earnest attempt to win it, but if we do end up losing, we'll switch over to this plan. If I'm honest, though, I don't have a good feeling about our chances," Yuuto explained and laughed humorlessly. They had somehow managed to hold the Flame Clan's forces at bay until now, but the difference in numbers was quickly becoming far too extreme. It also didn't help that the enemy was led by *the* Oda Nobunaga. Yuuto knew that it was impossible to keep salvaging wins or draws. He felt like he was playing Russian roulette with a six shot revolver that was loaded with five bullets.

"With that in mind, we may as well make the best of it. If we're going to lose, then we'll at least get everything we can out of it," Yuuto continued.

"So, it's something similar to the feigned retreat we used against the Lightning Clan, then," Felicia said as she drew the connection in her mind. The other generals who had been with him since the Wolf Clan days also nodded in agreement.

Feigned retreats typically involved dividing the army into three parts—one part clashing head-on with the enemy force, then feigning a retreat to lead the newly invigorated enemy pursuers into an ambush made up of the two remaining parts who had been lying in wait. It was a tactic that the Shimazu Clan of Kyushu had used to great effect during the Warring States Period, allowing them to defeat enemy armies far larger than their own. This particular plan was a variant of that tactic.

"I see. I did not know there was such a tactic... But even so..." Once she had learned the details, Fagrahvél had been impressed, but she still seemed to have difficulty understanding it. Perhaps to her, a woman of the 15th century BCE, it was a bit too advanced. In her mind, it probably sounded like something that came from myth. She may not have been entirely wrong, since its successful execution relied upon a combination of extremely charismatic commanders and finely drilled professional soldiers—something that was much harder to come by in these times of simpler military training.

“In that case, is there a need to fight with the intention to win? If we withdraw after a certain amount of fighting, it would reduce the losses among our forces,” Fagrahvél asked. By all accounts, her question made perfect sense. In fact, it seemed an extremely rational suggestion at first glance. Yuuto might even have agreed with her observation had their opponent not been Oda Nobunaga.

“No. Nobunaga will probably see through that. No ordinary feigned retreat is going to work on him,” Yuuto explained. He was practically convinced of that fact. Nobunaga was extremely sensitive to danger. Not only had history testified to his keen nose for traps, but Yuuto had also experienced it firsthand after facing him several times in battle. Then there was the fire trap he had set against Nobunaga during the recent Battle of Glaðsheimr. Anything less than a perfectly executed feigned retreat would probably make Nobunaga suspect that something was up.

“The vital element of this plan is to make the enemy believe our frontal force is the entirety of our remaining main force. If we succeed in doing that—if we throw what he believes is everything at his forces and still lose—even Nobunaga wouldn’t suspect that he’s being led into a trap,” he clarified.

“I see... However, it would be quite a dangerous gamble,” Fagrahvél replied.

“I know full well,” Yuuto stated flatly as he gripped his hand into a fist hard enough to almost draw blood from his palm. This was a plan that was going to produce a large number of casualties no matter how it worked out in the end. No matter what anyone wanted to believe, an organized retreat wouldn’t be able to draw the Flame Clan’s forces into the trap—and if he failed to draw them in, then the Steel Clan’s casualties would only be even greater. He needed to throw away concerns about the ethics of what he was about to do—to sacrifice the few for the sake of the many, no matter what reservations he held about doing so.

“And, once you’ve drawn the enemy into the palace, what then, Your Majesty?” Fagrahvél asked.

“I’m going to bring the Valaskjálf Palace down on their heads,” Yuuto replied frankly. This prompted a shocked stare from Fagrahvél and all of the other

assembled generals.

“So, where am I now...?” Nobunaga slowly opened his eyes and said with a self-deprecating tone. In front of him lay only complete darkness, and he couldn’t move his body in the slightest. In this state, he had no way of telling if he was still in the mortal realm or the afterlife.

“Ah, it seems I’m still alive for the moment,” he mumbled to himself. Perhaps only a small consolation under the circumstances, but his right hand was close to his chest, and he could feel the beating of his heart. Nobunaga let out a soft sigh of relief. Judging by what he could observe, he deduced that he was probably buried under rubble. He felt a heavy weight pressing down upon his body, and despite his best efforts, it wouldn’t budge from atop him. A fair amount of that weight bore down on his chest, and he found it somewhat difficult to breathe. On top of that, other things seemed to be going on...

“Aaaghhhh!”

“The leaves have caught fire!”

“Blast! Over here too! Put it out! Put it out!”

“The fire’s spreading too quickly! It’s surrounding us...”

He heard the panicked voices of various Flame Clan troops from beyond the rubble. It was an added blow after what he had just suffered. They were probably the soldiers that had come in from the rear as reinforcements. He wanted to tell them to hurry up and dig him out, but it seemed they were a bit caught up with their own problems at the moment. Even Nobunaga had to click his tongue and curse his situation. “Tch! The lad went through all that trouble just to spring this on me, huh?”

It was at this moment that Nobunaga understood the full extent of Yuuto’s plan. However, even as he lay buried under the rubble of the Valaskjálf Palace, there was still a part of him that was dumbfounded by the trap he’d found himself caught in. The idea of demolishing the palace and setting fire to the gardens was quite a mad scheme, but what was even more daunting to consider was that the entire hard-fought and hard-won battle itself had been bait meant to lure him in.

The land around the main palace hall was filled with beautiful gardens that were packed full of trees, and the ground was completely carpeted by layers of fallen leaves. It hadn't rained in several days, so those leaves were bone dry, making them ideally suited as kindling for the huge blaze Yuuto required. Had the battle against the Steel Clan Army been a mere skirmish, Nobunaga would have proceeded more cautiously, instead slowly making his way into the Valaskjálf Palace. Yuuto had used an actual, full-fledged retreat, making sure his army was actually scattering in disarray, to make sure Nobunaga would aggressively pursue him.

"Even if it was meant to force me to let down my guard...this is going to some radical lengths," Nobunaga remarked.

It had meant taking extreme risks in the name of drawing Nobunaga into the palace. One wrong step and the entire Steel Clan Army would have been destroyed. It was so ridiculous, so dangerous, that Nobunaga could only describe it as the work of a mad genius.

"Hello! Is there no one out there?!" Nobunaga squeezed every bit of noise he could emit from his throat. He needed to get out of here quickly and restore order, or things would quickly get out of hand. No, even before that, there was a chance he'd be buried alive and die beneath this rubble.

"I'm here! Come dig me out!" he shouted again, but there was no response. Based on the sounds he heard from the soldiers, they were a fair distance away. It was clear to Nobunaga that his voice wasn't reaching them. If he spent too much energy calling out for them, he might not be able to shout when he truly needed to. Nobunaga gripped his hand tightly into a fist as he fought off the fear that he'd end up dying beneath this rubble. How long would it take for that to happen? How long had he been buried here?

"Daddy!"

He heard the voice of his beloved daughter from above.

"Ah, Homura!"

"Daddy! I'm so glad you're alive! I'm going to get you out right away!"

He heard a tearful voice of happiness before the sound of heavy boulders

being thrown to the ground echoed down from above. At the same time, he felt the burden on his body lighten. Homura must have been throwing the rubble aside. He still found her sheer strength surprising.

“Ahh. Fresh air at last... Well, not quite, but it’s much better than being trapped under all that rubble.”

Once he was freed, Nobunaga stretched, taking in the open air with some relief. He felt a warm wind and the sound of fire crackling around him.

“Alas, he got me on this one,” he grumbled, furrowing his brow ruefully as he gazed around him. There was little that remained of the imposing palace, and the only thing that surrounded him was a mountain of debris. The ten thousand soldiers that had entered the palace with him were also probably buried beneath the rubble. Like Nobunaga, there were probably others who were still alive, but it was much more likely that very many had already succumbed, and those who hadn’t were probably so badly injured that they couldn’t move. It was a painful blow to his army. To top it all off, the blazing fire around the palace grounds had thrown most of the remaining able-bodied soldiers into a panic.

“Now, what to do...?”

Just as Nobunaga settled down to think, a drop of water fell upon his cheek. He quickly gazed up at the sky and grinned. “Hah! Well, it seems the heavens want to keep me alive.”

There had been several times in his life when rain had saved him from a desperate situation, starting with the Battle of Okehazama. The same was true this time. The fire and the confusion among the soldiers were both quickly doused by the rain.

“My Great Lord! So good to see you alive!”

Better late than never, the general in charge of the reinforcements hurried over, tears in his eyes as he confirmed Nobunaga’s survival.

“Yes. Even I feared I’d die this time,” Nobunaga replied.

“Yes. Your survival, I believe, is down to your divine luck, My Great Lord.”

“It seems I’m blessed with luck of one sort or another. Given that I’ve survived, I suppose it’s time we repaid them for our pains. You lot! There! Search there!” Nobunaga ordered as he pointed to the only part of the palace that had any semblance of its old form intact. For some reason, it had survived despite the rest of the building having completely collapsed. There was, of course, the possibility it had just survived by chance, but Nobunaga was convinced there was intent behind it.

“I was in there with them until just now!” Homura explained excitedly.

“I see. Well, you heard her,” Nobunaga said to his general.

“Certainly, My Great Lord. We’ll go and check it out!” the general replied. He took his soldiers and charged into the remains of the palace. However, he returned a while later with a downcast expression. “M-My apologies. There wasn’t a soul inside.”

“That can’t be true! They were there until a few minutes ago! Suoh Yuuto was *right there!*” Homura let out a cry of surprise at the report. However, Nobunaga’s expression lit up with a feral grin.

“Ah, so he’s survived. Good.”

If anything, the news had made him happy. Yuuto had beaten him or frustrated him countless times. Nobunaga wanted to get his revenge.

“There’s an escape path! There must be one! Find it!”

“Y-Yes, My Lord!”

The general quickly returned to the ruins at the behest of Nobunaga’s thunderously bellowed orders. As he watched him leave, Nobunaga then gestured to call over nearby soldiers. “Send messengers to the Eastern and Western Armies and tell them to keep a lookout for Suoh Yuuto! I don’t care what it takes! Find him and bring him before me!”

Nobunaga couldn’t imagine that even someone like Suoh Yuuto had any more schemes up his sleeve. His soldiers had mostly been scattered, and he only had a handful of troops left. By contrast, Nobunaga still had twenty thousand men he had left out of the main body and another twenty thousand in each of the Eastern and Western armies. While he might have suffered a tactical defeat as a

general, Nobunaga was now almost assured a strategic victory. In the Chu-Han War of ancient China, Xiang Yu had defeated Liu Bang in ninety-nine battles but had lost the war after just a single defeat. Meanwhile, Liu Bang, who had established the Han Dynasty, had conquered the empire even after losing ninety-nine battles to Liu Bang by winning the one, decisive battle. Nobunaga had no interest in being Xiang Yu; he had no interest in winning individual battles. What Nobunaga wanted was to conquer the known world. What mattered to him was to be like Liu Bang, to be the one to savor the sweet taste of victory at the very end.

“I’m gonna go look too! I learned his ásmegin! I’ll find him just like that,” Homura stated proudly.

“How reassuring to hear.”

“I’ll be right back, daddy! Oookay. Here I...huh?”

Just as she tried to start running, Homura’s knees gave out from under her, and she fell to all fours. Her arms also were unable to keep her up, and her cheek sloppily kissed the ground.

“Ack... Huh... Weird... I can’t...move... I’m so...hungry...” Homura’s stomach rumbled loudly as she lethargically whined on the ground.

“Ah... Don’t scare me like that. I truly thought you might have been injured,” Nobunaga said, letting out a long breath of relief. Something like this was completely predictable. Homura had been fighting almost continuously over the entire battle. Additionally, Nobunaga had no way of knowing, but Homura had entered the Realm of Godspeed, a mental technique that burned both ásmegin and stamina like paper, three times: against Hveðrungr, against Sigrún, Hildegard, and Felicia, and finally in order to clear the rubble over Nobunaga. She may have been a twin-runed Einherjar, but she was still only ten years old. Even her stamina had reached its limit.

“Here, give me your hand...”

Just as Nobunaga reached over to help Homura up, he caught sight of a masked man aiming an arquebus from a distance out of the corner of his eye. His body moved before his mind fully registered what was happening. Nobunaga immediately draped his body over his daughter, as though to protect

her. A shot rang out, coldly and ruthlessly uncaring of the father's love for his daughter and his instinctive need to protect her.

Hveðrungr, the masked man, tossed aside his arquebus. He would have liked to follow up with additional shots, but the soldiers were already forming a protective cordon around his targets. There was no chance that he could hit them from here.

"Tch. I suppose I always leave myself exposed in the end," Hveðrungr muttered, clicking his tongue in irritation and letting out a long sigh. He had been aiming for Homura but had ended up hitting a different target. Of course, the result was a massive achievement in and of itself, but Hveðrungr's focus had entirely been on avenging his humiliation by Homura. He had failed in his own objective, regardless of whatever else he might have accomplished in the process.

"Perhaps Felicia is right, and I'm fated to be that way."

"Stop babbling and start moving. The enemy looks like they've noticed us," his wife Sigyn said to him with a note of exasperation, urging him to cut short his moment of reflection. He had wanted to spend some time in quiet contemplation, but she seemed to be in a hurry.

"Here, give me your arm."

"Thanks."

Hveðrungr stood with Sigyn's help. The wound Homura had inflicted on his right leg was deep, and he had trouble walking on it.

"So, when'd you become such an honorable and loyal man? I mean, staying behind to take a shot at the enemy commander?" Sigyn asked teasingly.

Hveðrungr furrowed his brow in displeasure. It made the hair on his body stand on end to think that he was expressing any loyalty to that damned brat. There was no way this was in any way an expression of loyalty. "I don't know what it is you're going on about, but I was simply here for revenge. I can't very well let a ten-year-old girl get the better of me, even if she is twin-runed," Hveðrungr replied, snorting with irritation. One of his core principles was to

avenge himself against anyone that humiliated him, no matter what dirty and underhanded methods it required.

“Okay, sure, we can pretend that’s what this is about.”

“But it’s the truth.”

“You’re one of the greatest liars of the past thousand years. Only an idiot would take anything you say at face value.”

“Tch.”

Hveðrungr clicked his tongue in annoyance. He always found her faint air of superiority, as though she was seeing right through him, to be annoying. And yet, despite that, she was the reason why he was still alive. When Hveðrungr had been stabbed in the thigh by Homura and had dropped his trusted sword, even he had given up hope of survival. It was at that very moment that Sigyn had saved his life with a seiðr. She was an Einherjar with the rune of Svaðilfari, the Unlucky Traveler, and was considered one of the greatest seiðr wielders in all of Yggdrasil—known widely as the Witch of Miðgarðr. While she was able to use a wide range of seiðrs, she was most skilled in manipulating luck. Thanks to the two seiðrs Hamingja, which allowed her to bestow her good fortune on others, and Fylgja, which allowed her to take on another’s misfortune, Homura’s blow had missed Hveðrungr’s vital organs by mere inches, and he fell from the rooftop as he lost his footing. He then switched places with a corpse he had prepared ahead of time that wore his distinctive mask. Luckily, Homura had never seen Hveðrungr’s facial features and had mistaken the corpse for him. Then, in a bit of fortuitous timing, Nobunaga’s messenger had chosen that moment to find her, allowing Hveðrungr to escape with his life.

“Just try not to go around making any more promises your body can’t keep. If not for me, you’d have died at least five times by now,” Sigyn chided.

“I know, and I’m grateful,” Hveðrungr replied.

“Hah! Talk is cheap, eh, dear husband?” Sigyn laughed dismissively at his words of appreciation. There was a part of Hveðrungr that was hurt by this, but he knew he only had himself to blame.

“Again, it’s the truth.”

“Uh-huh.”

“You’re a terrible wife. Doubting her husband’s words of gratitude.”

“Well, yeah. I’m married to one of the greatest liars in history, after all.”

Sigyn casually responded with verbal jabs of her own. He felt another surge of irritation toward her. Yet, at the same time, he found the banter both fun and reassuring. Hveðrungr would never trust anyone other than his own family. However, Sigyn was probably the only woman in the world with tastes strange enough to fully love and support a liar, an underhanded cheater, and an all-around scoundrel like him. She’d even come with him for this dangerous mission. He started to think he could trust her as well.

“Hey, Sigyn.”

“What is it?”

“I’ve just come to a shocking realization.”

“Oh?”

“I love you.”

“Wh-Whaaat?! Wh-Where did *that* come from?!” Sigyn let out a surprised squeak, her face flushing scarlet. Hveðrungr felt another surge of affection for her.

“Heh, how adorable. I didn’t imagine you to be so flustered by this little,” Hveðrungr said teasingly.

“Grrr! You were just messing with me, weren’t you?! C’mon, that sort of lie is too far! Y-You worthless scoundrel! Playing with a woman’s heart is the lowest of low!”

This time, Sigyn’s face was flushed with anger, and she turned away from him with a pout, despite Hveðrungr having told her the truth. She really didn’t seem to understand how men thought.

“Sigyn.”

“...”

It seemed he had thoroughly upset her, and she refused to even answer. But

Hveðrungr, undeterred, continued to speak. “I’m tired. I’m going to take a short nap.”

“What?! Now?! You really are a self-centered piece of work!”

“I’ll leave the rest to you.”

With that, Hveðrungr leaned his body against Sigyn. He was, in fact, completely exhausted. Although Homura’s blade had missed vital organs, he had been stabbed in the stomach. The wound on his thigh was also deep. He had lost a bit too much blood. He knew. Just a gut feeling, really, but he knew. If he lost consciousness now, he would never awaken. If he was honest with himself, he didn’t want to die yet. He wanted to at least see the face of his nephew or niece. It seemed that he wouldn’t get that opportunity, however. Maybe that was poetic justice. He had killed far too many innocent people. He had deprived those innocents of their hopes and dreams. He didn’t have any regrets about doing so, but he knew there was a price to be paid for such things.

“Hey Rungr! Rungr, wake up! ...Rungr?”

Sigyn’s voice sounded so far away. It was like a lullaby to him, coaxing him further and further from consciousness. Hveðrungr’s awareness slipped away and he let go. How long had she spent trying to call him back? Sigyn pressed her palm against his chest, then gazed up forlornly at the heavens. A single tear ran down her cheek.

“Liar...”

AFTERWORD

I couldn't wrap up the story yet, sorry... (*gazes off into the distance*)

Well, uh, if I'm allowed an excuse, I could have finished everything off this volume if I wanted to, but given this is a long-running series, it'd have been a bit sad to rush to the ending, so I'd appreciate it if you'd stick with me for another volume.

At any rate, hello again, it's me, Seiichi Takayama. I've gotta say, this novel coronavirus seems to be quite a threat (eep!). My daughter hasn't been able to go to high school. It looks like the lockdown will last for a few years. As a parent, I'm worried that her generation might be called the coronavirus generation like the previous generation was called the relaxed generation. With that concern in mind, I'm personally hoping she'll be able to start school around September.

What's also worrisome is the economy. With the request for self-restraint on going out, there must be far fewer people going to the bookstore. I've heard e-books are doing extremely well because of people staying home, but light novels are for pleasure. If the economy goes south, people won't have as much money to spend on leisure activities. There's a lot to worry about, but I suppose the only thing we can do is buckle down and try to get through it.

Then there's the fact that this novel coronavirus has taken the life of someone who should have been regarded as a Japanese national treasure. Yes, as you're all aware, I'm referring to Ken Shimura. It was when I was writing this volume that I heard the news of his passing. It took a moment to register because I simply couldn't believe it. It had to be a lie. It really didn't feel real to me, and it made it hard for me to focus on my work. He wasn't family, and I had never met him, but it still left a void in my heart, and I felt a deep sadness at his death. Although I was cutting it pretty close to a deadline, I ended up watching all sorts of special programs celebrating his life. I needed to do it because I was having trouble processing the news otherwise.

To me, Ken Shimura is someone who made me laugh as far back as I can

remember. I grew up with the *Dorifu Big Laugh* and *It's All Fine*. I often showed my daughter Shimura Zoo videos. When I checked the internet, I found there were a lot of people suffering through Shimura Grief like I was. I'm pretty sure that to many Japanese people, he filled the role of the funny uncle in their lives. That's quite a remarkable achievement. It's quite late, but I would like to use this space to pray that Ken Shimura, the King of Japanese Comedy, the Great Comedian, is able to rest peacefully.

Now, let's leave the depressing stories there and move on to happier topics. Lately, I've been slowly working on a new series. I don't know when I'll have it ready, or even if I'll be able to get it published, but for now, I'm enjoying writing it as an author.

I began writing *Ragnarok* at the start of 2013, so it's now been seven years since I started. In that time, I've learned quite a lot about what it means to be an author and picked up new skills along the way; while I've been able to work it into *Ragnarok*, a house can still only be as big as its foundation. What would happen if I started a new series with my current skills? There's something exciting about that sort of challenge. Lately, there are plenty of people who handle more than two series at once, and while I've tried it several times, I can't seem to get the hang of it. Part of it is entirely due to the fact that I'm a slow writer, but around the time *Ragnarok* hit volume 10 or so, I felt like the opportunity cost of writing a volume went up exponentially.

Since it's a series I'm attached to, I couldn't just phone it in, nor could I afford to miss deadlines. Each time I went into writing mode for *Ragnarok*, I stopped working on my new series until I finished a new volume. However, I've recently started to feel I really need to put some proper work into a new series, so I've been trying to get on it.

One thing I've learned to do lately is to avoid trying new games. This was the best way to keep me motivated. It's very hard for me to resist temptation when it comes to my hobbies, so when I get hooked on a new game, I'll often end up getting lost in it for a whole month. But now that I've stopped buying new games and restricted myself to familiar, less fresh-feeling games, I've been able to maintain a proper writing schedule. Of course, it took me nearly ten years to

get to this point, but it was still a big paradigm shift for me. Hopefully, I'll be able to continue working on my new series at this pace and announce it soon. Personally, I feel like it'll be a series that'll surpass *Ragnarok*, so please stay tuned.

Okay, I'm finally out of pages, so I'd like to get to acknowledgments. To my dear editor, I'm sorry things got a bit stressful in terms of progress this volume. I'm always filled with a sense of guilt for making you deal with that. Your feedback at the end of this volume was really useful. When one's absorbed in a series like an author tends to be, it really does get easy to lose perspective, so it was really useful to have an objective voice on it. I hope to keep making use of your assistance.

To Yukisan-sensei, the illustrator: Thank you for the beautiful illustrations as always. My thanks, also, to all of the people who were involved in getting this book out, and more than anything, my sincere thanks to all of the readers who decided to pick up this volume.

I hope that we'll see each other next volume!

Seiichi Takayama

Bonus Short Story

So Close Yet So Far

“We’ve finally made it to Sigtuna,” Linnea remarked and let out a soft sigh as she gazed up at the fortress walls that loomed in front of her. Sigtuna, the Sword Clan capital, was a three-day walk away from the Holy City of Glaðsheimr—a mere stone’s throw away by all accounts. But that distance was the Steel Clan’s largest problem right now.

“I hope Father is okay...” she muttered to herself.

Three days away in the Holy Capital of Glaðsheimr, Yuuto and Nobunaga were engaged in a climactic battle for total control over Yggdrasil. The Flame Clan Army fielded over a hundred thousand troops compared to the Steel Clan’s thirty thousand. The disparity was obvious, to be sure.

“Tch! We need to hurry, Father might desperately need reinforcements even as we dawdle here!” Linnea continued, her worried tone becoming ever more pronounced. Unable to quiet her anxiety, Linnea stood up and began to pace. Linnea’s Steel Clan Western Division consisted of approximately ten thousand soldiers. Their addition wouldn’t cancel out the Flame Clan’s numerical advantage, but they would still go a long way toward evening the odds.

“Haste makes waste, Princess. The troops need rest,” Rasmus, the Head of Subordinates for the Horn Clan, furrowed his brow and remonstrated Linnea. While Rasmus was technically her subordinate, he was like a father to her.

“...I know that,” Linnea returned with a sour expression. She understood full well that an excessively hard forced march would result in some units falling behind and others deserting in the scramble. Tired troops wouldn’t be very useful in actual battle either. Even knowing that, she couldn’t help but want to push forward.

“Hah! I’m sure His Majesty is fine. He is a god of war, after all. No man exists in this world who can best him in battle,” Rasmus proclaimed proudly.

“I’d like to believe that too, but...” Linnea replied.

What Rasmus was saying was probably true. Even so, Linnea couldn’t help but consider the worst. What if his opponent was a person from the same land of the gods that Yuuto himself was from? Yuuto had suffered two defeats in engagements against Nobunaga, that much was true. She knew that Rasmus was simply trying to reassure her by taking a rosy view of the matter, but she couldn’t get rid of the anxiety she felt in the pit of her stomach.

“Oh divine Angrboða, please watch over and protect him...” Linnea said hopefully, biting back her frustration over the fact that this was the most she could do at that particular moment, and knelt in prayer to the goddess.

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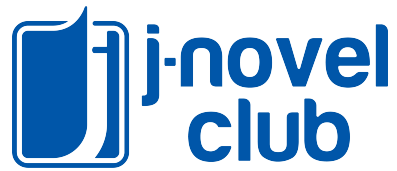
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The Master of Ragnarok & Blesser of Einherjar: Volume 21

by Seiichi Takayama

Translated by Noboru Akimoto Edited by Aaron Brown

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Ebook edition 1.0: September 2022

Premium E-Book